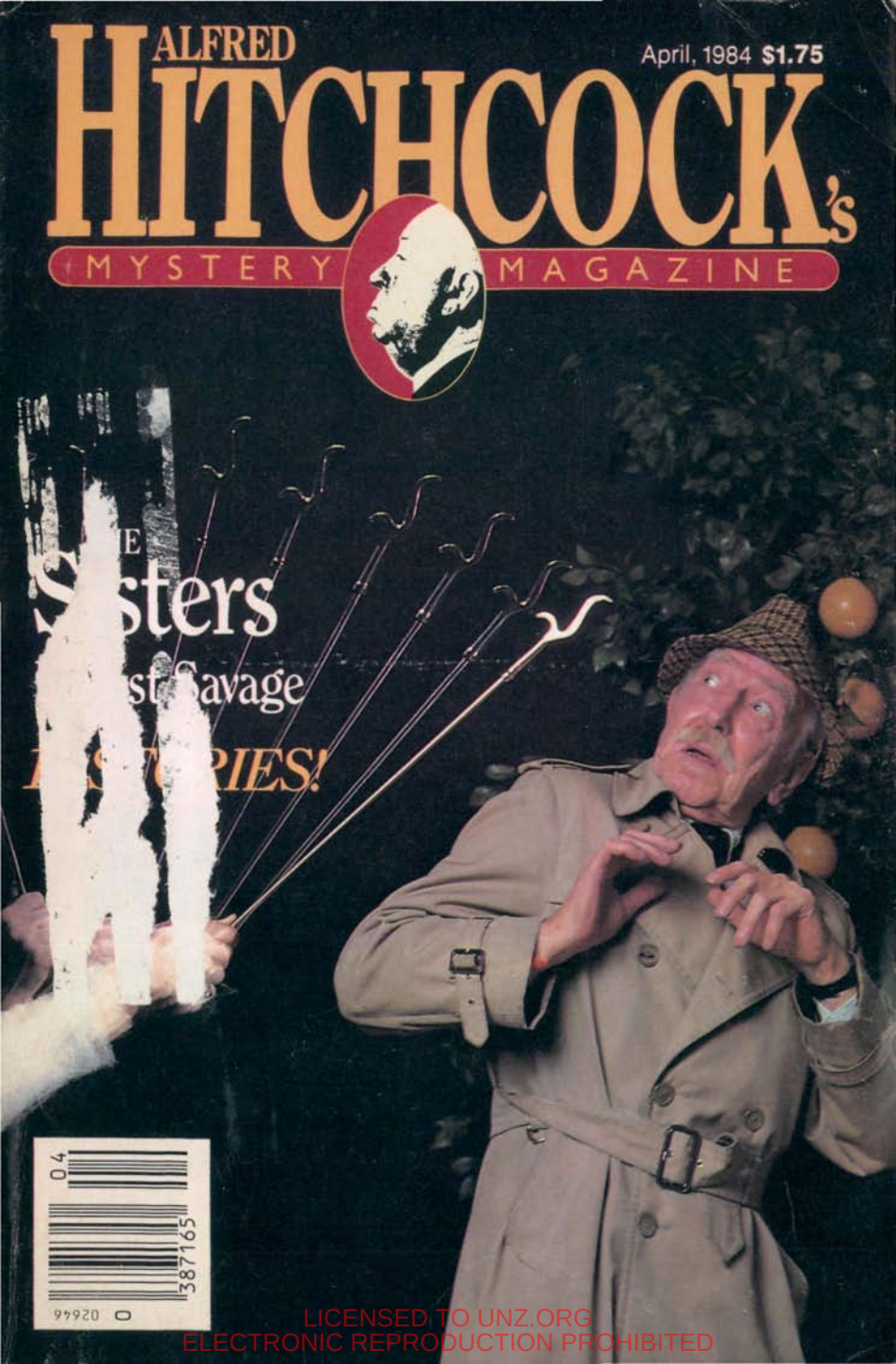
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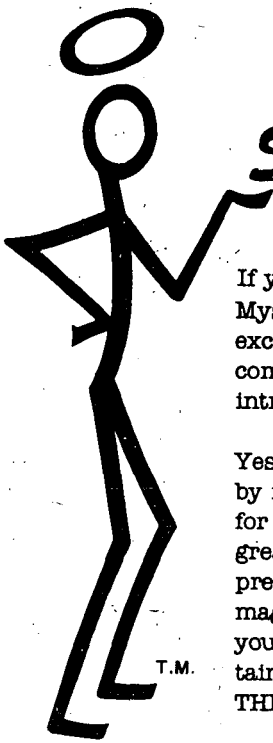
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

It is always a particular pleasure to us at AHMM when new writers whose acquaintance we have made through the Mysterious Photograph contest turn out to become regular contributors as well. Many of you will remember that the first contest (August, 1982) was won by James A. Noble, who has since brought us a number of delightful and wry stories, including this month's "Revenge of the Skinflint." In this issue we also have for you excellent tales by two other contest contributors, with an added fillip in the form of a contest prize to one of them. Robert Gray, winner this month and frequent recipient of honorable mentions in previous months, is making a double appearance—with his interpretation of the November photograph (see page 155) and in the short story "The Old Hidden Ball Trick."

Second, there is Anita McBride's "The Poison Flowers," a story that pleased us here very much. Ms. McBride also received an honorable mention for her submission about the July photograph.

On the other side of the coin are two familiar names whom we are glad to have in our pages again, after an absence of some years. Ernest Savage's cover story, "The Sisters," is his first in AHMM since 1981, and Margaret Maron, author of "Mrs. Howell and Criminal Justice 2.1," was last in AHMM in 1979.

All in all (and taken together, of course, with the other stories we haven't space to mention here), an issue we especially enjoyed putting together.

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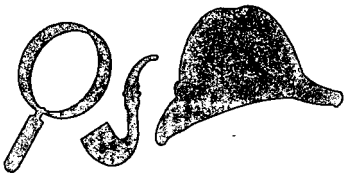
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FICTION



THE SISTERS

Illustration by John Jinks

"Well, it seems, dammit," Lieutenant Wells growled, "that the guy wasn't a bum."

Luis Escalera was hunkered down alongside the knees of the corpse. I was bent over, parting the low branches of the orange tree under which the man's head and shoulders lay.

"You mean," I said, "the shoes—"

"And the suit. Not off the Goodwill rack, Peck. Dammit!" Wells took off his peaked cap and ran a hand across the three-quarters of his head where hair formerly grew. I knew what he meant: he would have preferred a bum; and so would I. It would have been easier, less work.

It wasn't yet eight o'clock, the air still moist and cool from the long spring night, the sun still low in the eastern sky. The perfume of navel orange blossoms was almost cloying in the nose. Still, I detected the coppery smell of blood from the mess somebody had made of this non-bum's head, tucked under the

by Ernest Savage

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skirt of the fecund tree.

Wells was in the decision-making process, and it pained him. Everything pained Wells these days. This murder. The seven earlier murders in Clausen since the first of the year. The last twenty years of rampant growth in Clausen—*his* town—pained him, each newcomer bringing with him a burdensome increment of crime. Wells didn't understand crime; he merely and simply and purely hated it. Crime was killing Wells, a tooth, a hank of hair, a patch of stomach at a time.

Luis understands crime. He's a small, brown, wiry Chicano, smart and quick as a ferret. He also knows how to disappear before your very eyes—which he was doing now, becoming one with the brown earth of the grove where he squatted. Wells couldn't see him, Wells could see only me.

"Sergeant Peckinpaugh," he said sternly, his command voice, "you take this. Sergeant Escalera," he said to the re-appearing Luis, "you stick with the Park Plaza case. I'll have McVey and Bailey out here by nine o'clock," he added to me, and turned and strode the thirty feet back down the lane between two soldierly ranks of blossoming trees to Prince Albert Drive, where his car was parked.

Luis slowly uncoiled from his squat and grinned at me. "Buenas morning, pal," he said and followed softly in Wells' wake.

"Yeah," I said, "and a good dias to you too, amigo."

It's what happens when you've got more crooks than you've got cops. The Park Plaza case was distinctly a two man problem: cocaine. Whereas this—

A newspaper delivery boy had reported the body at six forty-five this morning. Four minutes later Wells broke me out of my sleep. My shift starts at eight and I mumbled to Wells that the body could wait; but Wells doesn't work by shifts or hours. He says the crooks don't, so how can we? And after twelve years on the Clausen police force I still haven't contrived a crushing answer to that. Maybe there isn't one.

The dead man was on his face, his feet, in those almost new shoes Wells had noted, well out from under the tree. He'd been killed by a mortal blow to the head, delivered some hours ago, the blood dry and oxidized on the collar of his shirt.

I straightened up and sniffed the perfumed air. This was the Bryson grove, turn-of-the-century old; a lot of placid history here until last night. But who knows about that? The lanes

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between the long rows of trees had been recently disced, the ground too soft and crumbly for footprints to be useful as clues. But it did not look as though the body had been dragged to where it lay. Nor could I see any sign of the (no doubt) blunt instrument that had killed him.

I walked inland from the street, and then right a couple of rows of trees, until I saw the Bryson house at the upper end of a lane. It was old and ramshackle, gray and dreary. On both sides of and behind this tenacious ten acres of trees there were new housing tracts. Even when *I* was a kid, let alone Wells, there was nothing for miles along Prince Albert Drive but groves. Now maybe forty scattered acres remain, the groves retreating farther and farther into the hills and up on the plateau to the east. It's not the same, it's not as good, this rampant growth. *Vita maxima;* which is what the old-time doctors called cancer.

I walked past a kitchen garden just beginning to sprout and knocked hard on a screened door to a screened porch that clung to the rear of the house, all the screens patchy with rust. House as old as the grove, but less well cared for; typical ranchers. A light shone through a window behind the porch, and a woman came out the back door from what was probably the kitchen and said to me sharply, "What do you want?"

"I'm Sergeant Peckinpaugh of the Clausen police," I said. "There's a body of a murdered man toward the front of your grove, down near the Drive. I thought I'd ask you about it."

"Well, that's a first," she said, untouched and still sharp-voiced. "I'm sure people have fallen down drunk out there, sergeant, and children been conceived, but so far no dead men. What do you want me to do about it?"

"I thought perhaps you might have heard something," I said. "He was beaten to death with a blunt instrument—often a noisy affair." My stomach rumbled; no breakfast, not even coffee; and did she smile through the screen?

"I sleep the sleep of the just," she said, "and heard nothing. Choirs of angels. But perhaps my sister did."

"She presumably being," I said, "less just than you." No breakfast, no manners: an ironclad equation. And yes, she was smiling as she unhooked the door.

"Come in," she said, "and find out for yourself. If you care to risk her wrath. Coffee, sergeant?"

McVey wouldn't get here for an hour. The chance of some passerby doing forensic damage to the dead man's body was nil.

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I stepped into the house.

Her name was Angela Bryson. Miss. Her sister's name was Melba Parks. Widow. Miss Bryson sat me down at her kitchen table, served me a huge glass of orange juice, a stack of buttermilk pancakes, and all the coffee I cared for. She had already eaten, she said, but drank coffee with me, smoked cigarettes, and revealed the family names. She had the face of Grant Wood's American Gothic wife, except that it knew how to smile. She was tall and loose-jointed with gnarled and big-knuckled hands. She was wearing jeans and a clean blue J. C. Penney work shirt. She had the shape of a field hand, not a woman. She was around seventy, I judged, with a lot of years to go. Melba, she said, was a "slugabed," still deep in sleep.

"Thus the probable wrath—?"

"Yes. She's jealous of her sleep, sergeant. The cause may not justify the predictable result." She shrugged. "We watched TV until ten and then went to bed—as I'm sure you'd get pungently told. We both go to sleep at once, a family trait. But—it's your business."

It was a low-key challenge, so I got up from the table and asked her to lead the way. She took me into the living room and pointed out a closed door. I opened it quietly, glimpsed the face of a sleeping woman, a quilt pulled up to her chin, and as quietly closed it again. I'd been finessed into this awkward, voyeuristic moment and said, displeased with myself, "She's younger than you."

Miss Bryson laughed, putting me tidily in my place. "Yes, she is, sergeant, and she always has been."

There was an illegal and dangerous space heater in the living room, but I didn't let it tempt me. There were two sagging overstuffed chairs facing a twenty-five inch TV set, almost as new as the morning. Against an inside wall was an overflowing bookcase; against the opposing outside wall a sprawling fieldstone fireplace, smoke-stained and mounded with long-dead ashes. An empty wood holder on the hearth alongside, a shovel, tongs, and a brush. Worn linoleum covered the floor, same pattern as in the kitchen, a bargain basement buy forty years ago. Conventional wisdom around this citrus-growing town is that once every ten years you strike it rich, the rest of the time you struggle. This house, this woman, attested to the struggle.

"The place was built by my father," she said, "in 1908. I was born here five years later, Melba four years after that. Father died in 1956, Mother in

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'63. Melba left here in 1944 and came back for the first time a year ago. Likely we'll both die here. The TV set is hers, the books mine. There in a nutshell is the Bryson story," she said, "not that it's germane to your morning's work. But," she added, "we've certainly had a lot of murder in Clausen lately, haven't we."

"Yes, we have."

"Growth!" She said it with contempt. Wells would've loved her.

"Did Melba marry a soldier in '44? A lot of them streamed through here in the war years."

"Yes, she did. Lieutenant Melvin Parks. Melvin and Melba. They went immediately to Norfolk, Virginia."

"And she didn't come back at all until a year ago?"

"Correct. My father bitterly opposed the marriage. He detested soldiers. *All* of them, I might add."

"You mean the good as well as the bad."

"All of them."

"But your father died nearly thirty years ago, Miss Bryson. It would seem that—"

"By then it was too late for any sort of reconciliation, even with me. Besides, Melba hated the place. The work."

"And still does, I take it."

"Yes, and still does."

"Why did she come back a year ago?"

"Because she had no other place to go."

"As Frost said, home is where they've got to let you in, is that it?"

"Yes it is. Like it or not."

She smiled again and I thanked her for breakfast and left.

"The man is dead," McVey said. "Is that what you wanted me to tell you?"

"Yeah, that and the name and address of the guy who killed him."

"Jesus, smell the air," Bailey said. "You don't get that in town no more. What you get is smog."

"Blunt instrument," McVey said, "as any kid could have told you, Peckinpaugh. Two whacks at least, down through the leaves of the tree, while the guy was on the ground. Go find a blunt instrument that smells like a bridal bouquet." He had Bailey pull the body out from under the tree and roll it over. "Plus," he said, "two whacks against the front of the head—or face, as we scientists call it. What was a face, anyway. Now you know why he's dead, don't you, Peck?"

"Just give me the name and address, Mac, and we'll bury the guy right here."

McVey stood up and I

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crouched down to check the pockets of the dead man's jacket. Stripped clean; as had been his pants.

"Robbery—right?" Bailey said.

"Bring the gurney over here," McVey told him, and the two of them hoisted the stiffened body aboard. "Rigor," McVey said. "Otherwise known as the coagulation of muscle protein, sergeant. If you want an offhand guess, I'd say seven to ten hours ago he quit breathing. Sixty-five, seventy years old—hair, skin tone, et cetera. Hundred sixty to seventy pounds—right, Bailey?"

"Right, boss."

"Six one, six two. The guy was in pretty good shape for a man of his years, or even your years, Peckinpaugh."

"Anyway," Bailey said, grinning an almost idiot grin. "We know it wasn't suicide, don't we?"

"Let's go," McVey said.

I studied the disturbed patch of earth where the body had lain, but found nothing of interest. Then I traversed the entire width of the grove looking for tracks, but found none, save my own leading up to and back from the house.

A gravelled driveway ran up the north boundary of the grove from Prince Albert Drive to a large combination barn and garage fifty feet or so away from the house. Inside were a 1970 four-door Cadillac, an old Fordson tractor, and an accumulation of ranch-type junk that spanned three quarters of a century. A lot of it was metal, from old bedsprings to a cluster of construction rods leaning against a wall. I looked at them with care, counted an even twenty, uniformly rusted and accreted with the webs and dust of years. They were a half inch in diameter and four feet long, ideal blunt instruments. But this was just cop work; just nosing around, mostly a waste of time, mostly to fill the long reports that Wells loves to read.

There'd been no car other than mine parked anywhere in sight along Prince Albert Drive. Possibly because it's against the law; but the victim's shoes alone told me he hadn't walked there, so he'd come either by private car or by cab.

It was by cab. The pertinent trip-sheet at the Ace Cab Company next to the bus station downtown logged him arriving at the eighteen hundred block of Prince Albert Drive at eleven ten last night. Picked up in front of the Clausen Motor Inn twenty minutes earlier by driver Ellison Smith, age twenty-one, a student at the local branch of the University of California during the day, a cabbie from

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six P.M. to three A.M. at night.

"And a good one," Harry Randall told me. I know Harry fairly well; he's managed Ace for years. "Most of the students stick with it a month or two," he complained, "and then quit. But Elly's been with me all year, holidays included. He's a first year pre-med student and a worker. I would bet—"

"You're telling me more than I want to know, Harry. Where does he live?"

He told me that and then said, "I would bet he sticks it out all this summer, Peck, and that'd be a first." He smiled, pleased with Ellison Smith.

It was twelve thirty. I ate a light lunch because I was having dinner that night with my girl, Bonny Johnson, at her mother's house, and Martha Johnson, the world's greatest future mother-in-law, believes that the shortest route to the altar is down a man's throat. Bonny teaches English and phys ed at the old, original Clausen High School and tutors in tennis at the Prince Albert Country Club as many hours a week as she wants. When I am making as much money as she makes, I'll risk that trip down the flower-strewn aisle so dear to her mother's heart. It could happen any year now.

Luis was at his desk, facing mine. He was looking glum, but that's just the natural set of his mestizo phiz. He had five folders on his desk, I had six on mine, counting the new one, which I labelled Murder/ Robbery. ID unknown.

Wells emerged from his office and leaned over my back, and I said before he could ask, "No identity, not yet. Pockets empty. Robbery possible sole motive, but all that mayhem to the head suggests otherwise. Also, he was lured out there. I think. The suit was even better than you thought, a couple hundred at least, bought from Burnham & Jones of Detroit. Probable origin—Motown. Also he probably stayed at the Clausen Motor Inn, which I will check after I've shuffled through this heap of junk I don't have time for. I—is that enough or do you want more along the same speculative lines? I know your lust for hard evidence, boss. Maybe the suit was ripped off in Detroit and sold to our man off the back of a truck in Kansas City. Or—"

"It'll be," Wells said before he walked away, "in the paper tonight. Front page. Our eighth murder this year, four still unsolved. I expect day and night work on this, Peckinpaugh."

Escalera filled the throbbing void in Wells' wake. "The thing is," he said, "the guy needs a distribution system. He brings it in off his yacht down in New-

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port, we know that, but then what?"

"Did he take that trip we thought he took last week, down to Ensenada?"

"I doan know for sure yet. How can I find time to go down there? Rhetorical, right?" He grinned, revealing a couple of gold-capped teeth. "I checked by phone this morning with the marina. He was gone forty-eight hours at least, probably more, plenty of time, but maybe he went to Catalina and laid over there. Who knows? Maybe he picks it up there."

Cocaine is what maybe he picked up there—or in Ensenada. Or at a rendezvous at sea. It pours into southern California through every chink in our tin-plate armor. And it's been showing up here in Clausen more and more lately, too much of it sucked into local noses on its way east to the big-user set in Palm Springs.

Luis knows about drugs. He'd lost a brother to heroin, the kid they all thought would be the family's flagship. Under that leathery brown skin there was heat. What we called the Park Plaza case had been our shared heat until this morning. Now his alone. Their army is bigger than our army—it's always one against many. They've got no rules, no union, and no hours, all the stuff Wells says you shouldn't think about; but it's always there in your head, pushing up, pushing out the hair.

I got up and went downstairs to see McVey. He was in his cluttered office. He said when I stepped through the door, "Not yet. See me at five. Or tomorrow. Monday, rather, since tomorrow, being Saturday, is a universally respected day off. Even in Mother Russia."

"For you, maybe, and the rest of the comrades, but not for me. Where did you pick up your degree, incidentally, you never told me. The Moscow University of Tractor Repair?"

"It was Leningrad, for God's sakes, not Moscow."

"Rust," I said. "Maybe rust embedded in the wounds. Plus cobwebs and dust. Yes—?"

"Ashes," he said. "Would you accept ashes, or have you got some kind of prejudice against the corpus of burned wood? Wood ashes."

"Wood ashes? In the wounds?"

"Yes. Oak, probably."

"Orange, maybe?"

"Not likely. Orange burns too fine. You got a bias against oak? You're full of biases, sergeant."

"You're right. What about the rest of our visitor from the east?"

"Nothing yet. I just looked at his head. He was killed in the head, Peckinpaugh, too much trauma to the head. Somebody

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didn't like him very much."

"A common affliction. You take his prints yet?"

"Your copy," he said disdainfully, "is probably on your desk this very minute."

"Thanks a barrel-full, Mac," I said and went away.

Marge Kelland said, "I was thinking about calling you, Jeffry. He checked in yesterday afternoon at four thirty. No car. He said he wasn't sure how long he'd stay, maybe just one night, but when the maid reported at noon today that his bed hadn't been slept in, I got a little worried." She opened the door of Room 12 and we stepped in.

It was tidy and clean, untouched-looking, everything in its proper place. A green glen plaid suit was hanging in the closet; a good suit; label: The J. L. Hudson Co., Detroit. In the bathroom, shaving and tooth gear were lined up in an orderly row on the shelf. The toothbrush was dry. A closed suitcase was on the rack at the foot of the bed. An American Airlines baggage ticket was tied to the handle.

His name was Charles L. Williams. He lived at 108 Cambridge Avenue in Ferndale, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Data from his registration card. I asked Marge if she'd gotten a good look at the man when he checked in, and she said she had. Then I asked her if she'd care to step down the street a few blocks and take a look at this body we had, and she turned white. "Oh no!" she said. "Oh no, Jeffry! I couldn't possibly do that! He's dead, isn't he?" Her eyes were huge.

"I think so," I said, and led her out of the room.

A copy of the dead man's prints was on my desk, just as McVey had promised; but no question now about who the guy was.

Through information, I got his Ferndale phone number, dialed it, and counted fourteen rings before hanging up. Then I called the Ferndale police department and shortly was talking with a Lieutenant Ritter of that force. I recited the facts of the situation and heard Ritter draw in his breath and hiss, "Dammit, no! I know Charley Williams, I've known him for ten years. I bought my last three cars from Charley, man! He's an Elk, so am I. You got a positive ID, sergeant?"

"No. That's one reason I'm calling. Has he got family there?"

"No, none. Charley never married. He was a thirty-year man in the Air Force. Retired a master sergeant. Been selling cars up on Woodward Avenue ever since. Jesus!"

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"Ferndale his home town?"

"No. New York, I think. But he's got more friends here than the mayor. Look, lemme get back to you. Maybe somebody here would want to go out on it. I'll call you when I get something. Jesus! What a damn shame."

He hung up and I sat there sighing. No bum, this man; more friends than the mayor where he lived.

It was four o'clock. I typed a few notes for the file and checked my watch again. Time to make another call.

Ellison Smith lived in one of the big old two story houses that made up the core of the city when it was laid out a hundred years ago. The few of that mixed Victorian and Queen Anne era which remain intact have been long since converted into rooming houses, one of which was his. But he wasn't there. His steely-eyed, slat-thin landlady told me that and then added that I was welcome to wait until he was—on the porch. Any minute now, she added.

A quarter hour later a new Dodge Challenger tooled down the street and pulled into the curb in front of the house. It was brown and tan. The one I had lusted over a couple months ago at Morrison Dodge had been green and cream. I had truly wanted that car. It had a body I would rate right in there with Bonny Johnson's for perfect proportions; and its 2557cc four-cylinder power plant moved it along in very good order. But I could not even consider paying that high up into the five figures for mere transportation and had walked, drag-footed, away.

A tall gangling blond kid got out of the Dodge carrying a load of books and walked up to the porch. I stood up and said, "Mr. Smith?" and he nodded, a non-commital, future-bedside-manner smile on his face. I told him who I was and why I was there, and the smile faded away.

"You mean he's *dead?*"

"Beaten to death with a blunt instrument, Mr. Smith. About thirty feet into the grove off Prince Albert Drive. Where did you let him off, as exactly as you can recall?"

"Right there, sergeant. Right in the middle of the grove. No driveway, no house, no nothing there, just the trees."

"No car nearby? As though waiting for him, maybe?"

"No sir. But it was funny—the whole thing, I mean. He said he hadn't been in Clausen for forty years and he couldn't get over the changes. And he was excited. He told me the eighteen hundred block of P. A. Drive, but we had trouble finding it. I mean only one mailbox along

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there, and no numbers on it, just a faded name."

"Bryson?"

"I don't know. He saw it, not me, and he said, okay, go about another hundred feet and stop." He shrugged. "So I did, and let him out. Middle of nowhere in the middle of the night."

"As though maybe he was following some sort of instructions?"

"Yeah, like that, just like that."

"Could you identify him?"

"You mean the body?" It didn't faze him, this pre-med student.

"Yes."

"Well, I doubt it, sergeant. I mean, it was night, and a cabby doesn't really look at a guy unless he gives you trouble. A woman, yeah, but not a guy. Besides, I couldn't see much of his face under that hat."

"He wore a hat?"

"Yessir, one of those floppy Donegal tweed jobs—the kind Rex Harrison wears. Real classy."

Well, each to his own role model, hero, or god. Or car. "Harry Randall thinks the world of you," I said. "He says most of you college guys quit after a month or so. You didn't."

"Hell, man, I need the bread!"

"That car—?"

"Yeah, mostly that car, an arm and a leg a month. But you know—" He turned and gazed at it, snug against the curb. "I fell in love with the damn thing. I *had* to have it."

I knew what he meant. "When did you buy it?"

"Four months ago." He looked suddenly aggrieved. "And this dump doesn't even have a garage to put it in."

I knew what he meant by that, too; it should be wrapped in velvet every night. I thanked him and walked the five and a half blocks back to the station.

Luis said, "Any luck?," his face the usual impassive mask.

"A name I got, Luis. Also an address. Tiger Town. Detroit. Also a mystery. You?"

He shrugged and suddenly spouted in his softly accented English, "What good can I do in a place like the country club? They think I'm a bus boy on his day off. You, maybe, could make a connection, but not me. It comes over the bar, Peck, it comes out of the pro shop, they snort it around the pool, for God's sake! Everybody's in on it. It's a goddam epidemic—I doan know."

No call had come in from Ferndale, but it was still a little early for that. Five thirty here and seven thirty, eight thirty there, I wasn't sure. In a half hour I was scheduled to pick up Bonny and take her out to her mother's house for dinner. In my trusty old Fairlane.

"Look," I said to Luis, "on

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your way home tonight stop by Morrison Dodge and find out if a guy named Ellison Smith paid cash for a Challenger he bought four months ago. About."

"Why?"

"I don't know why—a hunch. Maybe I'm just jealous. In fact, I know I am. He's a pre-med student at the university—and the stuff's all over there, too. He's a cabby nine hours a night, and what niftier and more innocent way to circulate around town is there?"

"So?"

"So if he paid cash for his car—something around thirteen grand, the way it's equipped, that would tell us something, wouldn't it? Also the guy we *know* is bringing the stuff in is a doctor, even if a lousy one—right? Maybe they've got some kind of an affinity. Hell, I don't know either, Luis, but you might as well give it a shot."

Luis shrugged, got up, and left the room.

I reached for the phone to call Bonny and it rang under my hand.

It was a tired Lieutenant Ritter from Ferndale. He told me the name of a man who'd be arriving at the airport at seven forty- eight tomorrow morning aboard a United flight—and could I meet him?

Sighing, I said yes.

"He'll have you paged," Ritter went on. "He's a widower, about seventy, a lot of white hair. He's lived in the apartment next to Charley's for ten years. He'll have some stuff for you—letters Charley got. He'll identify the body, but give him some help with that, sergeant. They were pals. You got all that?"

"I got it, lieutenant. I'll meet him. And thanks a lot."

"What's in a name?" I said.

There'd been a lull in the dinner table conversation over coffee.

" 'That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet,' " Bonny said, finishing the quote, and I said, "Showoff. Pedant."

"What name?" Martha Johnson asked.

"Angela. Who would risk naming a daughter that? We should all be issued numbers until we're twenty-one—then we should be given a suitable name."

"Bonny," Bonny said. "It means healthy, sweet, and lively. I looked it up in the dictionary when I was twelve."

"See what I mean?"

"I knew an Angela once," Martha said. "At school. She was two or three years ahead of me—Angela Bryson."

"I was gonna ask you if you knew her, Martha—but I was afraid to suggest that you were

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within fifteen years of her age. Twenty."

"Foof, Jeffry. I started school a year early and skipped a couple of grades before the tenth. I had a very pushy mother—just as Bonny does. Also, Angela dropped out a few semesters to help her father with the grove. You could do that sort of thing then. But her senior year she was captain of the field hockey team. Do you know what field hockey is, Jeffry?"

"Some Victorian form of exercise for sex-starved young women," I said. "White middy blouses and black bloomers. Very exciting. But my point is that this Angela Bryson ain't, I don't think, no angel. How well did you know her?"

"I didn't *know* her at all. But she was a very large girl and quite handsome—in a startling sort of way."

"But not angelic."

"No, not angelic."

"So what did she do," Bonny said, "kill someone?"

"I hope not, Bonny, I hope not."

His name was Solly Epstein, and he did indeed have a lot of snowy white hair—over a pair of sleep-starved eyes. I took him to a pancake house for breakfast before we went to McVey's dark little basement warren to identify the body of his friend. Which he did at once, despite all the damage, and then just stood there crying. I took a bunch of tissues from the box Bailey keeps there and stuck them in his hand.

Upstairs at my desk he gave me three letters he'd taken from Williams' apartment in Ferndale. The last one was dated a week ago.

"He's got these canaries," he said, "and a tank full of tropical fish. They had to be fed, y'know, and talked to. He asked me to do it while he was gone."

"And these letters, Mr. Epstein?"

"He showed 'em to me, they were in his desk. He usta talk about this 'Angela,' I mean for years he did. Fell in love with her out here in '44. In the service. I wasn't in the service, too short, rheumatic heart. Christ! I'll outlive everybody I know, a curse, sergeant, a curse." He wiped his eyes again. "Anyway, he found out she was still alive and finally wrote her. Maybe two months ago, and a couple weeks later he got an answer—that first one there. And right away he wrote back. Hell, you can read 'em, I read 'em, he read 'em *to* me, for God's sake. They're love letters, sergeant, I mean, like you're twenty years old again."

"Why letters?" I said. "Why didn't he just phone her?"

"She's got no phone. Would

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you believe?—this day and age, big orange-grower like that?"

"Yeah, I'd believe. And not such a big orange-grower, either, Mr. Epstein—ten acres of very old trees."

"You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not, sorry."

"Gosh." Epstein shook his head. "Charley usta talk about this town, Clausen, nothin' but groves, miles of oranges everywhere you went. Gosh. You know what's happened to Detroit, sergeant? No, don't answer that—but Charley kept dreamin' about out here—all this, I don't know, all this *fresh* world out here. And that woman, sergeant, that woman."

He yawned, a sudden convulsive attack of fatigue.

"What I did," I said, "was reserve you a room at a motel a few blocks up the street. I'll take you there."

Angela Bryson wrote in a disciplined Palmer-method script that was almost flawless. The first two of the three letters Epstein had given me were a kind of reprise of old times, of the intensely romantic hurry of the war years—*their* war, the last of the righteous fights. But the third—his invitation to death—was explicitly up to date, naming the day and time of final rendezvous. "I will meet you," she wrote, "in the middle of the grove, about thirty or forty feet in from Prince Albert Drive. You remember that lovely street, I'm sure. Oh darling, I'm so ready to go with you, I do not care to whence. There is so little time left for us and so many dour, dead years to bury. I remember you so clearly, so tall, so soldierly in your uniform, so very, very gallant. But I had then my father, as I have now my sister. We must be clandestine, secretive. But meet me there, *meet* me and we'll talk of our long-delayed destiny. Oh my darling, I've never even begun to love another man!"

Barbara Cartland, I thought; right out of Barbara Cartland. But I was moved, touched. I could easily see that disguised field hand writing such torrid, heart-throbbing stuff, so long repressed, so caged in dreams.

But why had she killed him?

For being forty years late?

"Peckinpaugh," Wells growled, "you mean to tell me you made that woman—a *suspect*—serve you breakfast?" He glanced at my report. "Pancakes, orange juice, coffee."

"A standard American breakfast, boss, every worker's basic right." Of course, I put stuff like that in my reports just to catch his interest, which it always does. The thing is, he considers the relationship be-

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tween a cop and a suspect to be that between, say, Reagan and Andropov: very circumspect, loaded with protocol. "Also," I added, "she wasn't a suspect then, merely a lonely old lady—and you know what a sucker I am for them. Besides, I was starving to death." My report had been written and laid on his desk at five fifty P.M. yesterday, and didn't include a lot of later stuff. It was now nine forty-five Saturday morning and I'd just gotten back from delivering Solly Epstein to his well-deserved rest.

"Anyway," Luis said, sitting next to me in Wells' office, "we cracked the Park Plaza case, lieutenant. At least, I think so. I mean we got this kid downstairs who spilled his guts about an hour ago. Half hour, maybe. Right now, two guys are picking up Dr. Edward Krueger out on Riverview Drive. Unless he's down on his boat again. We got a warrant. I got two hours' sleep last night—in my car. I doan know—"

I loved it! I love it when Luis slips one of his triumphs in between a couple pieces of fluff and then fades away into his chair.

"Smith!" I hollered.

"Yeah, Smith, Ellison. He—well, finally what he did was talk, you know what I mean."

"Talk—how?" Wells said, super-alert now.

"Well—talk. Through his mouth, lieutenant."

"Who's Smith?" Wells said, shuffling rapidly through the papers on his desk.

"Well," Luis said, "this is a—what do you say—verbal report. I dinn have time to write it up. Jeff gave me Smith last night. He said it was a hunch. He was right."

Wells glared at me. He hates hunches. He says they're a substitute for hard work. He says they're inadmissible in court. He says broke horse-players live on hunches.

"Actually," I said, cowering a little under his stare, "what this is is one of my scheduled days off. I've got this tennis date twenty minutes ago. Anyway, hot dog for Luis."

"Hunch!" Wells snarled. "You know what a defense attorney can make out of a hunch, Peckinpaugh? What hunch?" he said, almost an afterthought.

"Anyway," Luis said, "thees Smith guy signed a confession a while ago. He's asleep now downstairs. He had three or four thousand bucks' worth of the stuff in his lunch bucket. He feels better now, I think. He is a young man. He named Krueger as his source of supply."

"Krueger?" Wells said.

"Krueger."

"Krueger is who we wanted,

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isn't he?" Wells said.

"Si," Luis said.

She must have started at dawn, or even before. I suppose she would know every twig of every tree in the grove, even in the dark.

I heard the old Fordson chugging way off to the left. She was near the end, she'd disced nearly the whole ten acres by the time I got there that morning. She was wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, plus the J. C. Penney work shirt and bluejeans. When she saw me, she shut off the Fordson and slumped over the wheel. She looked gray in the face.

"You again, huh, sergeant."

"Yeah, me again, Miss Bryson."

She lit a cigarette and blew smoke into the still-clean air. The sky overhead was almost a natural blue this pretty, smog-free day.

"She used to say that one of these fine nights we'd get beaten to death in our beds," Miss Bryson said; a rasp, a tired, fading voice. "She said it often, she was phobic about it, sergeant, obsessed. She said we were so alone here they wouldn't find our bodies for days. She wanted me to sell the place and buy a condominium downtown—live like civilized people." Her gaze, fixed on a distant point, focused now on me. "Well anyway, you know who your body is, don't you?"

"We know, Miss Bryson. Your old boyfriend."

"Poor Charley," she said. "The thing is I couldn't marry him then. Father was already crippled with arthritis, and Mother's heart had always been bad—"

"And Melba was already gone—Mrs. Lieutenant Parks by then."

"Yes, Melba was gone."

I had Xeroxed the letters Solly Epstein had brought with him from Ferndale and got the copies out of my pocket. She glanced at them and said, "Yes—the corresponding set are up in the house. His to me." Her voice had wrenched unexpectedly with bitterness as she spoke these last three words; and I got a bad feeling about her morning's work.

"Melba's dead, isn't she?" I said.

Her eyes wandered away again. "Yes, Melba's dead, sergeant."

And buried out here in the grove someplace, I didn't say aloud. That's why all this unnecessary tractor work. She'd buried her sister's body out here somewhere, and we'd have to probe the whole damn ten acres to find it—unless she told me where it was, and *that* made no sense at all. The idea wearied me half to death.

She began to speak again, in

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a voice so faint and deep in her throat that I had to lean forward to hear what she said. "She arrived about a year ago in that big old Cadillac of hers—just drove in unannounced and went straight to bed. Dead broke. She spent most of her time in bed, or watching that damn TV of hers—and eating the food I fixed. Bitched at me to sell the place—never did a lick of work. Only thing she ever did was go get the mail, walk down to the box and get the mail. Every day." She straightened her slumped shoulders, and a light appeared in her eyes. "And that's why Charley's dead," she said, surprised at the news.

"And that's why she's dead, too."

The light faded from her eyes, the cigarette dropped from her fingers, and her big, powerful body began to tilt toward me, a suddenly unconscious weight that I eased awkwardly to the ground below. Her hat had rolled off in the process, and I saw a matted patch of gray hair on the back of her head where a lot of blood had flowed some time ago and dried as hard as the sole of a shoe.

But her pulse was strong and steady. I took time to read that and then dashed all the way across the grove to where I'd parked my car in her drive and radioed for an ambulance.

"Well anyway," I said, "the *worst* thing that could have happened didn't. I mean, what if she'd buried Melba in the grove and just clammed up about it. We'd be probing around out there for months."

Wells didn't like hypothetical stuff, the what if's. He was frowning over my report, which I'd written up Saturday night on Bonny's typewriter at her place. He recognized the type, and he didn't like that, either, all this loose living any more, guys actually spending their nights with girls.

He looked at me, still frowning. "So Mrs. Parks died of cardiac arrest, did she?"

"That's what McVey said. There wasn't a mark on her. She was a little crazy, I think, boss. She got up early—about five o'clock Angela says—and attacked her in her bed, hit her twice, once across the shoulders and once on the back of the head. And then she fell over dead on Angela's floor. The poker was still in her hand."

"The one she used to kill Williams—"

"Yessir. She'd hidden it under her mattress—along with his hat."

"And then Miss Bryson got out of her bed, got dressed, and did about six hours' worth of work in the grove?"

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"Boss, you'd have to know her to believe it, but that's just what she did. And a damn neat job of it, too, even though concussed out of her mind."

Wells was shuffling through the letters attached to my report, all six of them. "Melba picked up the mail every day," I said. "It's the only thing she did besides eat, sleep, watch TV, and bitch at her sister. She and Parks had ridden high for a while, apparently, and she had delusions of grandeur, or something. A little crazy, like I said. Anyway, she couldn't have Williams meddling in their lives, so she set him up to meet her—as Angela, he thought—last Thursday night in the grove and beat him to death with the poker. Welcome to California."

"What she should have done," Luis said, sitting next to me in front of Wells' desk, "is tell him Angela was dead. It would have saved a lot of—"

"No, Luis. Read his first letter. He says he'd just learned she was still alive. He didn't say how he'd learned it, but it could have been any number of ways—a private dick, for instance."

"And she tried to kill her sister to gain control of the property—right?"

"So it would seem, but who knows? Like I say, I think she was nuts."

Wells snapped the folder shut on my report. "Miss Bryson," he said, "is apparently in the clear, but we'll need a full statement from her before the inquest, Peck. As soon as she's able, I want you to—"

"She's able right now, boss. She got up yesterday afternoon, walked out of the hospital, and took a taxi home. I'll get the statement this morning—it'll be a pleasure. Maybe she'll fix me lunch."

Wells glowered at me, and I skulked back to my desk, glad he hadn't discussed the poker any more than he had. Friday morning when I'd looked at Angela's fireplace I'd seen what was there, but not what wasn't: the poker; the one indispensable piece of fireplace equipment. I should have sensed its absence then—the perfect "blunt" instrument—and begun a search for it. If I'd found it Friday instead of Saturday, as I did after Angela went off to the hospital, it would have saved that very good lady a very bad beating.

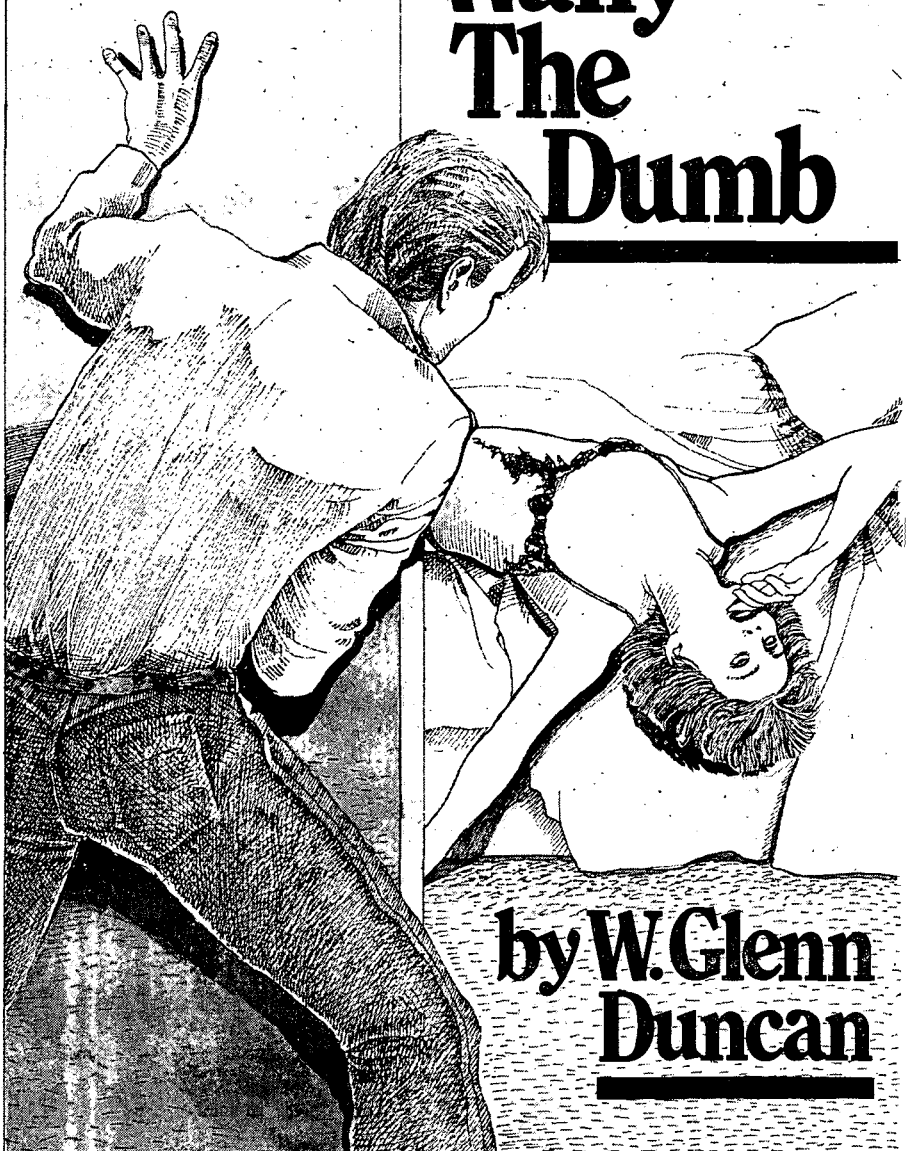
Maybe what I'll do is take *her* to lunch.

I wonder if anyone has in the last forty years.

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FICTION

Wally The Dumb



by W. Glenn Duncan

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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It all started on the night the spiders drove Wally the Dumb out of his house.

He was absolutely right to run from them. A Sydney funnel-web spider is the deadliest creepy-crawly that ever drove an insect hater to drink. Thirty minutes after being bitten, you start to die, and without treatment, it doesn't take very long. The Sydney part of the name comes from their only known habitat: a hundred mile stretch of the Australian coast centered on the largest city. The Sydney funnel-web is a brown-black spider with a body an inch and a half long and the biggest fangs you ever saw. According to the experts, the little beasties can drive those twin hypodermics through a fingernail.

Personally, I don't know if that is true. I leave funnel-webs strictly alone. Most people do the same thing, and every spider season the insect exterminators get rich all over again. *Everybody* has their house sprayed. Everybody, that is, except Wally the Dumb.

Wally came banging on my door well after midnight. He had a sleeping bag draped over one shoulder, a small sports bag in one hand and a sheepish look on his long, horsey face. "Uh, Alex," he said. "Could you put me up for the night?"

When you've known Wally as long as I have, you don't ask why. I let him in, waved him toward the convertible sofa, and tried to escape back to bed. It didn't work.

"You won't believe what happened to me tonight, Alex."

I almost told him I didn't believe most of what happened to him, but I stopped myself in time. Sarcasm goes right past Wally and you find yourself tangled in explanations; everything you say sounds more and more churlish, but he just frowns and nods solemnly. It's embarrassing.

Wally stripped the cushions off the hide-a-bed and spread out his sleeping bag. I leaned against the wall, waited to hear about his latest escapade, and remembered how Wally first appeared.

Wally is the third cousin twice removed or some equally remote relation of Celia McKenzie, my partner in Farrell and McKenzie, Security Advisers and Private Investigations. I'm Farrell.

Celia McKenzie and I first met a month after I set up a little one-man office in the Bondi area. That was five years ago. After Celia and I had dated for a few months, with mixed results, we realized we made a lousy couple, but pretty good friends. When Celia missed out on an appointment to the New South Wales Police Force, it

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seemed the most natural thing in the world for us to work together. We do a bit of divorce work—not much these days, thank God—and corporate security jobs, and Celia is slowly building up our image with her advice to retailers about burglary prevention. We do all right. We're not getting rich, but we do all right.

Wally stumbled into our lives almost two years ago, when he arrived in Sydney, fresh from the farm. He wandered into the office one day, a long, lanky twenty-year-old with a quick shy smile and a shock of corn-yellow hair.

Celia took him under her wing, and we decided to pay Cousin Wally minimum wage to clean out the office and do the occasional odd job. He solemnly introduced himself to me as Walter Theodore Dumbarton. That got shortened to Wally the Dumb ten days later. Celia had put him to work cleaning up the supply closet. She gave him one of those gizmos that prints labels on sticky tape. We had lost an expensive camera the week before and didn't look like having it returned, so Celia told Wally to label the supplies.

He spent two hours in there, clicking away with the tape gadget, and when he finished he proudly showed us the results. He had labelled everything, all right, but instead of putting the company name on all the equipment, Wally had taken Celia's instructions too literally. Each camera was tidily labelled: Camera. Other items were tagged Tape Recorder, Dead-Bolt Latch Demonstration Unit, and even an unopened ream of paper for the photocopier bore the legend: Paper.

Wally the Dumb still cleans the office, but that's all. And he has strict instructions not to touch anything but wastebaskets.

Wally finished arranging his gear and told me about the spiders. He said he decided he needed a hundred dollars more than the Flick man did, so he did his own spider spraying. And he saved even more money by only spraying the lawn. A heavy load of spider-killer on the grass, he reasoned, would provide a barrier to keep the funnel-webs away from his rented cottage.

Wally told me how he bought a gallon of the most potent insecticide he could find, rented a spray unit, and doused the lawn with spider goo. It was nearly dark when he finished, and after a quick meal and some television, he went to bed early. But when he woke in the night and stumbled toward the bathroom, he met three spiders in the hallway and found another one in the bathroom.

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Wally drove the funnel-webs out of his lawns, all right. Right into the unsprayed house.

"I ran back to the bedroom and jumped up on the bed," he said. "Geez, they were all over the place. I was pretty scared. I grabbed stuff out of the closet and got out of there as fast as I could." He shuddered and scratched at the cowlick that always stuck up at the back of his head. "I guess I messed up again."

"I guess so. Ah, don't worry about it. You can sleep here for a few days. Until the professionals spray your place."

"Thanks, Alex. I appreciate how you and Celia always take care of me."

"Don't mention it. I'll see Celia at the office tomorrow and tell her where you are. And, speaking of tomorrow, I'm going back to bed. It's my morning in the office. You sleep in, if you want."

"Can't," he said proudly. "Got me another job, starting first thing in the morning."

"Oh? Doing what?"

"A bloke in Chatswood has a petrol station right between two motels. He's gonna try to get more business from people who stay overnight. You know, the next morning, before they start driving again. Anyway, real early, I got to go wash the windshields of the cars parked at each motel and put a leaflet thing under the wipers. Pretty neat idea, eh?"

"Pretty neat, Wally. Okay, you leave whenever you have to. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Goodnight, Alex. And thanks, again."

I waved and walked back to my bedroom, chuckling over Wally being chased by a platoon of irate spiders.

The next morning I talked to Wally again, and there was nothing funny about the conversation. He phoned the office at ten o'clock, and his normally cheery voice was heavy with fear.

"You gotta help me, Alex. I'm really in a lot of trouble this time."

"What's the matter, Wally? Where are you?"

"At the police station. In Chatswood. They let me make this one phone call and I didn't know who else to ring, so . . ."

"Calm down. What happened?"

"Geez, Alex, I don't know, but they're talking about murder and I didn't do anything, I promise. I only . . . "

"Okay, okay, Wally. Let me talk to one of the cops."

A slow, deep voice came on the phone. "Sergeant Costello."

"Sergeant, this is Alex Farrel. Farrell and McKenzie Investigations. Can you tell me what the problem is with Wally

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. . . uh, Walter Dumbarton?"

"Farrell, is it? Are you a lawyer, Mr. Farrell?"

"No. I'm a friend of Dumbarton's. Is he going to be charged with anything?"

"You better believe it, Farrell. He was found in a motel room with a dead woman. Look, it's none of my business, but if you're a friend of his, you better find him a lawyer. He's going to need one."

"Thanks, sergeant. Put him back on, please."

"All right, but make it quick. We still have more questions for him."

When Wally returned to the phone, I said. "That cop says you were in a motel room with a murdered woman. Is that right?"

"Uh, well, yes, I guess it is, but I wasn't there. When it happened, I mean. I didn't do anything, Alex, I swear I didn't do . . . "

"Hold it, Wally. Listen to me. As soon as you get off this phone, they're going to start questioning you again. Don't say anything. Not a word. I'll get a lawyer and be there as soon as I can."

He sounded hesitant. "But, can I do that? I mean, they're not such a bad bunch of guys and if I explain . . ."

"Wally, trust me. Not a single word. I'll be right there."

"Okay . . . "

Thirty minutes later, Ben Guildford and I hurried into the Chatswood police station. Ben's a solicitor friend of mine, and he agreed to help Wally through the initial hearing, at least.

When we pried Wally away from the detectives, they weren't very happy. Wally, it seems, had followed directions and kept his mouth shut after our telephone conversation. Ben scowled a little, smiled a lot, and borrowed a barren interrogation room for our talk with Wally.

"I did what you said, Alex. I didn't say anything at all," said Wally. "They didn't like it very much, though."

"You'd like spending the next ten or fifteen years in jail a whole lot less. Now, what the hell happened?"

He shook his head sadly. "Oh, geez, Alex. This poor woman got herself killed, I guess, and the man went by so fast I didn't get a very good look at him, and then, when I got hit on the head, I blacked out and the cop who woke me up kept bumping me, you know, and he confused me with a lot of crazy questions and . . . "

It went on like that for a while, but we eventually got the whole story out of him. Wally said he hadn't been able to sleep at my place, because of thinking about the spiders, so he decided to do his windshield

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cleaning early. He picked up his cleaning gear and leaflets from the all night gas station and marched off into the night to do the right thing for his new employer. It was three o'clock or thereabouts, he told us, when he went to the first motel. As he cleaned the windshield of the first car, a man rushed out of a nearby motel room, jumped into a car, and drove away.

Wally said he put a leaflet under the wiper of the car he had cleaned and he was about to start on the next one when he noticed the man had left the motel room door ajar. Wally said he thought it wasn't very nice of the guy to leave the door open like that, because anybody could walk in and steal the TV or something, so he went over to close and lock it. At the door, he saw a woman lying across one of the motel beds.

"She looked terrible," said Wally. "She was sort of flat, you know, and she had big bruises and cuts all over her. And she didn't have any clothes on," he added, wide-eyed.

"Why didn't you just close the door and holler for the cops?"

"Well, I was going to, but she looked . . . well, she looked lonely and helpless and I only meant to cover her up 'cause I didn't think people should see her like that. But when I started to do that, all of a sudden I heard a noise behind me and then—whammo! something hit me and I guess I went out like a light."

Ben just sat there, looking lawyerish, so I asked the questions. "Which way were you facing? Into the room or toward the door?"

"Uh, toward the door, I guess. Why?"

"Whoever hit you had to be hiding in the room, then."

"Oh, yeah, that could be. I think the bathroom door was closed. I'm not sure, but I think it was." He brightened. "Does that help?"

"Don't know yet. Go on."

"There's not much more. When I woke up, it was daylight and this big cop was shaking me. And there was a motel maid standing in the doorway wringing her hands. She looked like she was about to cry. And then more cops came and they talked to me and finally they brought me here."

"Okay, Wally," I said. "Did anyone else see the man who left the motel room?"

"Oh, no. The parking lot was empty. Of people, anyway. It was real early, after all, and even I wouldn't have been there except I couldn't sleep because I kept thinking about them spiders and . . . "

"That's the second time he's mentioned spiders," Ben said. "What do spiders have to do with this?"

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"Nothing," I said. "Don't ask. You don't want to know. Wally, what did the guy look like?"

"Well, it was kinda dark, you understand, and he was in a big hurry so I didn't see him for very long, but I'd say he looked . . . sort of average."

Wally was a lousy eyewitness. Ten minutes of questioning produced only a vague description of a hurrying man, one that would have fit a thousand males. Average height. Medium build. Dark suit, possibly blue. Dark hair, brown or black. And how long was his hair? Average, of course.

I sighed. "The car, Wally. What about his car?"

"It was a sedan, regular size. I mean, it wasn't a sports car or a station wagon. It was grayish, but not really gray, I think. Maybe one of those tan or sand colors."

"What make or year model?"

"A Ford? Maybe not, though. But fairly new, I think."

"I suppose it's too much to ask for a license number."

"Sorry. Oh, wait a minute, I remember one thing. It had a decal on the rear window. One of those butterfly things."

That, at least, was something. The "butterfly thing" Wally saw was an advertising decal for a tourist island on the Barrier Reef off the northeast coast. Which wasn't all that important unless you knew that a major car rental firm used those decals to identify their cars. And promote the island.

"A Dunk Isle sticker," I said. "So the car was a rental."

Wally perked up. "Does that mean you can trace the man?"

"Not without more information. I shudder to think how many average men with dark hair are driving light-colored rental cars at this very minute."

"Oh, yeah, I see what you mean."

"Ben," I said, "do you have any comments?"

"Nothing very hopeful, I'm afraid. It appears the police have a prima facie case against Walter. I should be very surprised if he is not formally charged within an hour or two. If so, the magistrate's hearing will take place this afternoon, or perhaps early tomorrow. I shall appear for Walter, of course, and if he is bound over for trial, I shall attempt to seek a reasonable bail. Beyond that, there is little we can do for the moment."

Wally looked glum. The drab interrogation room seemed to suck all the country bloom from his face. "You will help me, won't you, Alex? You and Celia are the only people in Sydney I trust and, geez, this is pretty serious, I reckon."

I chimed in with more cheer and optimism than I felt. "Re-

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lax, mate. Seel and I will get you out of this mess." I believed Wally's story because I knew him. If he had lied, the story would have been simple and transparent, with lots of clear, irrelevant details. Much like Wally himself. But believing him and being able to help him were two different things.

"Oh, Alex," said Wally, "there's one more thing. Will you call somebody to get those creepy spiders out of my house?"

"Sure, Wally. No problem."

I slapped his shoulder heartily, then stood with Ben while a burly police constable took Wally away down a long, government-green corridor. Wally looked like a puppy being left at a boarding kennel.

Ben Guildford registered as Wally's attorney and made arrangements to be notified of the hearing time. I got Ben a cab, thanked him, and went back into the cop shop. My attempts to ferret out information about the victim were no use. When they started handing out the old "not until we locate the next of kin" watermelon talk, I gave up.

I rang the office from a pay phone, but missed Celia. She had taken most of the morning off and was scheduled for a luncheon meeting of her businesswomen's club. I left a message on the machine.

"Wally the Dumb did it again. It's bad this time, so don't leave the office this afternoon until you see me."

Hardencourt's Motor Inn was on Highway One, and the room where the woman had died was on the end of one wing, near a high brick wall. A ten-year-old, rust-riddled compact car was parked in front of the room. White tapes surrounded it and identified the heap as a matter of police interest. A bored looking, uniformed policeman idly strolled around the tapes.

As I parked my car, I saw a face in the motel office window, so I strode toward the cop like I belonged there. I told him who I was and said I had a repossession order for the car. He wouldn't let me take it, of course, but I didn't care. The conversation let me be seen with the cop. I wrote in my pocket notebook and walked around the car a couple of times. Then I let the cop point out the motel office, and I marched toward it. The face abruptly disappeared from the window.

When I pushed open the office door, a beefy man in his forties limped behind the counter and leaned against it. His face was red and fleshy, and his eyes looked like marbles. He licked his lips repeatedly.

"Afternoon," he said. "Help you?"

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"Farrell. Lemme see the registration card for the woman."

"Uh, yes, officer. Right here." The card was separate from the rest, and he handed it over with an eager-to-please expression on his face. "Um, the other detectives already took all the information. Is there something wrong?"

"Hang on."

I let him wait while I copied the woman's name and address. Hilda Bratton, with the correct license number and a street number in Cootamundra, a country town three hundred miles away. I looked up at the motel man and asked, "You Hardencourt?"

"No, there's no Hardencourt any more. He died five years ago. Aust-East Property Trust bought this place from the estate. I work for them. I'm Kevin Chifley, the manager. Say, I told the other cops all this . . ."

I held up one hand imperiously, wondering how long I could string him along. "This card. That's a man's handwriting, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, it is. It's my handwriting. I told the others that. The lady told me she had hurt her hand, and she asked me to fill in the card for her. Look, how many times do I have to tell you guys?" His little eyes receded in his suet face as he figured it out. "Can I see your identification?"

I tried the half-second wallet flip routine, but it didn't work. Chifley held a stubby finger on the ID card until he read and digested all of it, then he turned from toady to tyrant.

"Damned *private* detective," he snarled as he snatched the registration card out of my hand. "Go on, get the hell out of here. I got nothing to say to you."

"You keep losing motel guests like this and you'll have plenty to say to somebody, pal."

"Not bloody likely! I can't help what happens in the rooms. This is a respectable motel."

Maybe it had been, once, but it wasn't now. The place was fifteen or twenty years old, and it had fallen from grace. All the little signs were there. The paint under the eaves of the covered walkways was flaked, the parking lot was dotted with scabrous patches, and the office was littered and dusty. It wasn't quite a dump yet, but in another two or three years it would be a hot mattress joint that catered to the two hour trade of bored housewives and jaded salesmen.

"Yeah, sure, Chifley, a real nice place. The Hilton chain must be terrified of the competition."

"Get the hell out of here!"

When I got back to the office, I found Celia pacing the floor. She is one of those big women,

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five feet eight inches of tawny hair, sleek girl muscles, and long, tanned legs. When Celia walks down the street in a short skirt, adolescent males have been known to butt their heads against buildings and howl like wild dogs.

"What has Wally done now?" she demanded. "And when will you stop calling him Wally the Dumb?"

"When he stops acting that way. Simmer down, Seel, we need to talk. The boy has a real problem this time." I outlined the story for her. During my recitation of the spider episode, she giggled, but when I got to the morning phone call, the laughter left her green eyes. She perched one magnificent haunch on the edge of my desk and listened somberly to the rest of it.

"Oh boy," she sighed when I finished. Then, briskly, "Right! Once more into the breach for good old Cousin Walter. What do you have so far?"

I gave her the details on the Bratton woman, and she went straight to the phone. In ten minutes, she had found the country address was a phony and had sweet-talked a friendly Motor Registration clerk into checking the plate number.

While we waited for him to call back, I rang the Flick man. He thought it was the funniest thing he had ever heard. "You wouldn't believe it," he said, "but we get one like this every couple of years. Spray the garden and drive the *atrax robustus* inside. No worries, mate. We'll take care of it. But tell your friend to stay out of the house for at least three days. We'll have to use a special insecticide to drive the little devils out. Too powerful for people."

I assured him Wally would not be using his house for a few days, told him where to come to pick up the keys, and he hung up, chuckling to himself.

After that, I rang Jim Donovan. Jim's an old-timer in the NSW Police. He's coasting toward the pension now, but is still very sharp. We trade information occasionally and play poker in the same group once a month.

"Hilda Bratton, eh?" he said. "Lemme see, Alex, that sounds familiar. Uh . . . got it! Hilda Bratton, aka Hildy Brasher, Hilda Booker, and a couple of others. She's got form."

"What's her line, Jim?"

"Oh, small time con woman, mostly. I think she did a year or two back in the mid-seventies for check passing, but generally Hilda works the con. Usually with a partner, but not always. Nice looking woman, Hilda. Early forties, but she could pass for thirty, easy. Look, Alex, I can check, but I think Hilda's up in Mulawa Women's

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right now, doing a turn on a fraud rap. She and a drongo named Slick Willy Ardivale found a vacant house for sale, got the keys from a stupid real estate agent, and copied them. Then they advertised the same house for rent. They showed it at night, with a story about its not selling so they'd decided to rent it. They collected three different lots of rent advances and promised the suckers they'd turn over the keys when the checks cleared. It was Cardivale, as I remember, who tried to rent the house a fourth time to a young probationary constable who smelled a rat."

"Jim, Hilda's out of Mulawa. And she's not going back. They pulled her out of a motel in Chatswood this morning, and she'll never be any deader."

"Ah, that's who the motel woman was. I heard about it over coffee this morning. Didn't get the name, though."

"Looks like your Hilda at this point."

"Don't they have the guy who did that one?"

"Nope. They've got a suspect, but he's clean. He's the goofy kid who cleans my offfice. Celia's cousin. I'm trying to find out who really did it."

"I love it, Alex. You're off again, aren't you? Leaping into the fray for some poor slob who just happened to be standing there holding the smoking gun. Ah, lad, your gallant quests are an inspiration to me in my dotage."

"Knock it off, Jim. The kid really didn't do it."

"Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure. And how do you know, pray tell?"

"He told me so."

Jim was still laughing when I hung up. Everybody else seemed to be having a merry old time today, but I hadn't found anything amusing since the night before.

Celia came across from her office then, with a local address on Hilda Bratton, courtesy of Motor Reg. She said she was off to check it out and left in a swirl of skirts and glossy hair.

After she left, I tried to puzzle out a situation to fit Wally's story. If what he said was accurate, there were two men in the motel room with Hilda Bratton. Correction, a man and another person—gender unknown—in the room. One man ran and the other person belted Wally on the head and then, presumably, ran too. So, what was going down in the motel room? Hilda had registered as a single. Was the trio a meet? A drug sale, for example? That didn't seem to fit Hilda's MO, but old dogs sometimes learn new tricks. And what was the significance of the injured hand? Was she really hurt? Or did she simply want to keep her handwriting off the registration card?

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If so, why register with her own name? Or was the dead woman someone else and the real Hilda Bratton was still tucked away in Mulawa?

That line of speculation looked interesting, but Ben Guildford squashed it when he rang to say Wally had been formally charged with the murder of one Hilda L. Bratton and would face the magistrate at eleven the following morning. He said he would be in touch when a bail figure had been set.

After Ben's call, the phone stayed busy for an hour. When that happens, I think we should give up on the answering machine and hire a secretary. Then Celia adds up the hours in the week when the phone doesn't ring at all, and she suggests I pay a secretary's salary out of my half of the profits.

We still don't have a secretary.

Mostly the calls weren't serious, but they kept me from working on Wally's problem. A finance company wanted two repossessions done, one of them in a hurry because they thought the deadbeat was ready to skip. I thanked them for the work, then laid off the rush job on another agency. I decided the routine repo could simmer for a few days.

Next, an irate shopkeeper wanted to argue about the advice. Celia had given him regarding burglar-proof locks. It took me fifteen minutes to get him to tell me the brand name of the lock he had installed. It wasn't on our recommended list, and he wasn't happy when I told him that model was nickel-plated pot metal that wouldn't hold off a determined alley cat, let alone a burglar. We said goodbye, agreeing that you only get what you pay for.

There was a call from a night watchman firm who needed a man for that night, by midnight at the very latest, and would we please, please tell them if there was anybody in our files who might be able to spend a night alone without being afraid of the dark. I gave them a couple of names and reminded them they now owed us one.

The last call was from Jim Donovan, and it was the worst.

"Alex, lad, I'm ringing with bad news. About the Bratton killing and your friend who protests his innocence so loudly. I rang one of me old mates at Chatswood. Now don't you go telling anyone this, but the boys up there are pushing on this one. They say poor Hilda died hard."

Died hard, indeed. Hilda had suffered massive internal injuries and five broken bones, including two in the head. The killer had systematically beaten her to death.

"Jim, is there any chance

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Hilda was hooking and picked up a rough-trade john?"

"The Chatswood blokes say no. And that fits Hilda's record. I don't see her on the game, old son. Hilda would rather con you out of a dollar than earn ten. She wouldn't work for it."

"Okay, Jim. Thanks."

"The boys are after a conviction, Alex. Be sure your friend didn't do it before you get in too deep."

"Yeah, sure. So long."

Celia came back as I put down the phone. She looked as frustrated as I felt. The police had already sealed the Bratton apartment when she got there. She interviewed the neighbors and got a thumbnail profile on Hilda, but it didn't tell us much. Hilda Bratton was reportedly well preserved, somewhat brittle, but friendly when she wanted to be. She borrowed small amounts of money a few times and repaid it reluctantly, after repeated demands. She had lived there for three months, and she didn't talk about her work or her past.

"Alex, surely the police will do their legwork on this and come up with the man in the rental car."

"I hope so. But I don't like the feeling in my stomach. Jim Donovan says they're going to nail Wally for it. I don't think they even believe there *was* a man and a car."

"It's not looking good for Wally then, is it?"

"No. And can you imagine him on a witness stand? He'll hem and haw and get confused. Any decent lawyer will tie him up in large, ornate, guilty-looking knots."

"I suppose part of this is my fault," said Celia. "When he first showed up, I should have sent him back to the bush and not encouraged him with a make-work job."

"Oh, come on! It isn't that. It's just that Wally is . . . well, he's out of his element in the city. He's like an Irish setter, all floppy ears and big feet, wagging his tail and thinking the whole world loves him. He's too trusting, that's all."

"Maybe. Still, if we do get him out of this, I promise to stop nagging you about calling him Wally the Dumb. And maybe we can stop some of his oddball jobs, if we badger him into . . . "

"Hey, maybe that's it."

"What? What's it?"

" 'Badger,' you said, and maybe that's what happened in the motel room. Wally may have stumbled into a badger game that went wrong. Hilda was the bait, and the guy in the rental was the mark. But who was the boyfriend?"

"Let's find out."

"We will. And it's about all we have to work on. Okay, Seel, the office is yours till further

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notice. I'm going on the night shift."

I spent my nights on stakeout at the Hardencourt Motor Inn. With the car parked in an alley across the highway, I had a good view into the motel courtyard. My old ten-by-fifty binoculars let me see through a window into the motel office. The window needed cleaning.

Every morning, I would crawl into bed for a day's sleep, feeling less and less confident about the badger game theory. Late in the afternoons, I'd check in with Celia and pick up the day's news.

Most days, the news wasn't very good. Wally was bound over for trial. The prosecutor pushed for a high bail and got it. Neither Celia nor I could raise enough money, Ben Guildford backed away shaking his head, and the bail bondsmen laughed outright. Wally stayed in jail.

Celia pestered the cops to run forensic tests on all the possible rental cars, but they refused. They claimed the reasons were departmental budgets and manpower shortages, but Jim Donovan said they just didn't see the need. They had their man.

Jim gave Celia a list of every known associate of Hilda Bratton's, and we checked them out. I cut my sleeping to four hours a day and worked on some of them. Celia took the others. They all came up clean.

On the sixth night, I huddled in my car with the binoculars, a vacuum flask of cooling coffee, and the dark, gloomy, night thoughts. Then, a few minutes before eleven, things finally started to happen. A dingy Volkswagen pootled into the motel. A short, chunky blonde got out. She tottered into the reception area on spiky heels. Through the glasses, I saw her talk to Chifley, the manager. They argued for a while, and she seemed to be winning. Finally, he shrugged and handed her a room key. She rattled it in her hand, blew him an exaggerated kiss, and strutted out.

She moved the VW to a parking slot at the rear wing of the motel and went into a room. The drawn curtains glowed when she turned on the lights. The blonde didn't stay inside more than thirty seconds before she emerged, climbed back into her car, and drove out of the parking lot. She went past the mouth of the alley, and I got a glimpse of her chin-high silhouette behind the wheel.

If I was right, the badger game was running again, and she was the bait. The only question was: would she draw the right flies?

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She didn't come back for almost three hours, but when the little beetle spluttered into the motel driveway again, it was followed by a red sedan that bounced alarmingly on weak springs. The woman parked the VW near her room and helped the other driver out of his car. He was a chubby little man who stumbled a lot. The blonde put her arm as far around his waist as she could, and together they walked into the motel room.

Nothing happened for five minutes; then a bulky form stalked across the parking lot toward the room. I left my car and followed. I hid in the shadows by the motel office while the man thumped the room door. When it opened and let a slab of light fall out onto the parking lot, I saw the man was Chifley. He shouldered his way through the door and slammed it behind him.

When I was halfway to the room, I heard the rumble of voices, and when I stopped outside the closed door, I could make out the words.

"... hell you mean, bringing my wife to a motel room?"

"Your wife? She never said anything about being married."

"Oh, Harry, don't hit him." The blonde recited her lines in a mechanical monotone.

"Hit me? Hell no, don't hit me. Look, mister, I didn't mean anything. I met her in a bar, you know, and we had a few drinks and ..."

"I ought to knock your teeth out. Dragging my wife to a motel. Probably made her pay for the room, too, didn't you?"

"Well, I don't know. I... she said she had a room and ..."

"Ya see! Why, you're stealing my money, almost. I give her my paycheck, and she spends it to meet you in a motel."

"Hey, look, don't worry about the money. You want the money back? Here, what'd the room cost, thirty bucks, forty bucks? Here, here's fifty. Hey, don't push me around like that! Take a hundred! Take it allll ..."

The fat man's voice rose as he scuttled out the door, tossing a sheaf of bills behind him. He passed within a few feet of me, but I don't think he saw me in his blind rush to his car. The red car clanked out of the parking lot, bottomed its springs with a sickening thud, and then the screech of burning rubber wailed and faded.

The woman giggled as Chifley started to close the door. Before it latched, I straight-armed it open. It caught him in the face, and he backed into the room with a dazed look and a smashed nose that dripped blood onto his shirt.

"Party's over, chilluns."

The blonde slumped her shoulders and swore mechanically. "Chifley, you couldn't run

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a bloody chook raffle!"

Chifley tried blustering. "What do you want? I run you out of here once. Now you get out and stay out!"

"It won't wash, Chifley. We're going to have a chat with the cops about your badger game. Nice little sideline for a worn-out motel. Do they always cough up the cash so easily, or do you have to thump some of them?"

"I'll thump you, you bloody . . . "

He came across the room in a lumbering rush, then pulled up short when I pointed my gun at his face. It was hard for him to stop in time but he managed, and he slowly backed away until the bed hit him behind the knees. He sat down abruptly, his bloody nose dripping into his lap. The blonde put her hands up and threw Chifley a look of pure loathing.

"Did you kill the Bratton woman, Chifley, or did the mark do it?" I asked.

"Christ, the mark did it! It wasn't me. I was late getting here because the old couple in Eighteen came complaining about their bloody air conditioner and I had to go fix it. When I finally got here, there was no answer, and I had to let myself in with the passkey. The creep had beat Hilda something terrible. She was lying on the bed, breathing funny. She kept gasping and her face got darker and darker. Then she made a rattling sound and stopped breathing. I felt for her pulse and then the mark came out of the bathroom and he kicked me on the knee. It put me down quick smart, I can tell you. And he ran away. I started to follow him, but I couldn't hardly walk, you know, and I saw that kid outside washing car windows. So I stayed in the room, and when the kid came toward the door, I hid in the bathroom, like the mark had.

"I heard the kid catch his breath when he saw Hilda, and he sighed, all deep and sorry-like. I peeked through the bathroom door and saw he wasn't looking, so I hit him on the back of his neck. He fell down. After that, I went back to the office and faked a registration card for Hilda. And then I had to wait for somebody to find them. I kept watching the room, but the kid didn't come out. Hell, I got worried after a couple of hours. I thought maybe I'd killed him, you know?

"Finally, about seven thirty it was, Janice—she's one of the maids—went in to do the room. She came out screaming and crying. I called the cops and—hell, you know the rest."

As it turned out, Chifley told the truth when he said the mark killed Hilda. After Chifley

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confessed, the cops decided to go back and start again from square one. The butterfly decal told them which car rental firm to check, and the car color Wally described helped some, too. There were fifteen Sydney-based rental cars that might have been the one at the motel. Every one of them had been washed, some of them more than once. But the cleaners had missed a tiny smear of blood on the velour door panel where the killer's hand had grasped the handle to pull the door closed.

The rental agreement had his name on it, and the police in Melbourne quickly located the dry-mouthed plumbing salesman who had lived in his own private hell since he lost control with a girl who turned out to be not so willing after all.

Wally was turned loose and all his police records destroyed. The judge did a five minute number from the bench, apologizing to Wally between baleful looks at a red-faced, squirming police prosecutor.

Celia urged Wally to sue the police and the state for false arrest and imprisonment, but Wally's not the type. He grins about it now, calls it "an honest mistake" by the cops, and claims he never doubted we would prove him innocent.

The funnel-web spiders departed from Wally's house in high dudgeon, and Wally signed an irrevocable five-year contract with the chuckling Flick man.

And Wally has a new job. Don't ask me how he got it, but he works weekends in King's Cross. Every Friday and Saturday night, Wally the Dumb stands outside a strip joint, hustling the yokels in for the overpriced shows. I couldn't understand it, at first. But when Celia and I wandered up to the Cross to see him work, I decided the guy who hired Wally was smarter than I thought.

It's because Wally looks so honest and so downright countrified himself, I think. Anyway, when he looks out over the crowded sidewalk and yells, "Hey, they're taking their *clothes* off in here," the rubes stampede for the entrance.

And it's Wally's new job that worries me. King's Cross in Sydney is like 42nd Street in New York, the Strip in L.A., and Soho in London. It has more grifters and hustlers and thieves per square mile than you or I or Wally can imagine.

And I keep waiting for Wally the Dumb's next phone call.

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FICTION

The Old Hidden Ball Trick

by Robert Gray

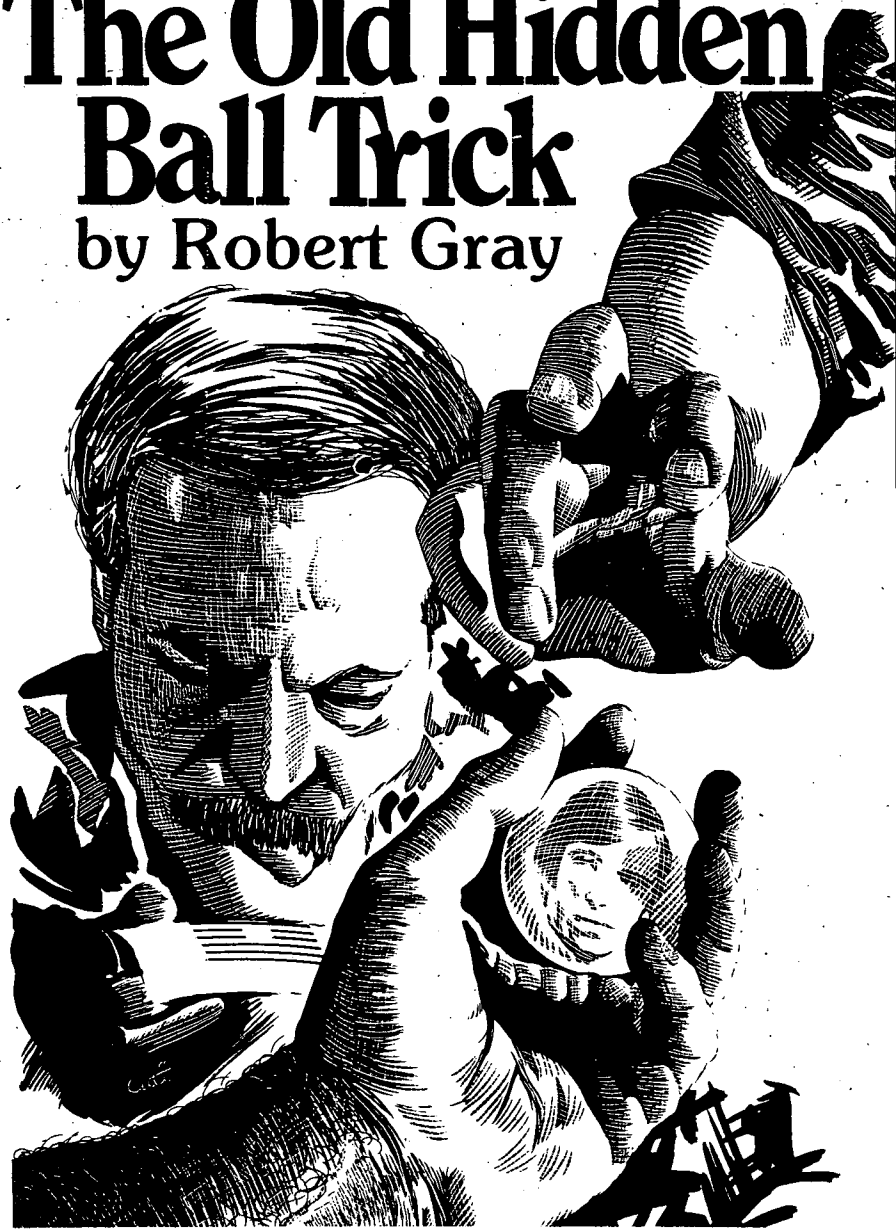


Illustration by Nicola Cuti

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Anne walked down the staircase, which creaked despite her light step. She could hear Tom in the kitchen, talking loudly on the phone. He sounded angry. The telephone slammed back into its cradle. It was too early in the morning for subjecting herself to one of his moods. She turned on the last stair and hurried back to her bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she waited until the kitchen door closed and his car pulled out of the driveway before going down again.

The faculty lounge was crowded. Detective Sergeant Harry Baxter poured himself a cup of coffee and stood off to one side of the room, reading notices posted on a large bulletin board. It was nothing like the one down at the station. He was used to finding sign-up sheets for bowling teams, fast food menus, and department memos, but the index card he was looking at here came from London and asked whether anyone "would care to swap digs for the summer." Last summer. One thing never changed. Bulletin boards everywhere were always out of date.

A table emptied nearby, and Baxter claimed it. As he lit a cigarette, Dean Kelcher appeared in the doorway. He was a large man with a doughy, unreadable face. When Baxter had first met him an hour before, he seemed eager to assist with the investigation. His handshake was firm, and his eyes never wavered.

But it had taken fifteen minutes to get the answer to one simple question: Was there anybody on campus who might know something about Oriental philosophy? During that time, Baxter had learned the school's total enrollment, the tuition cost per semester, thumbnail sketches of half the faculty, and the hazards involved in federal cutbacks. He finally had to ask his original question again. Kelcher shrugged and replied, "Of course there is."

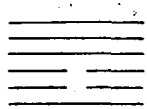
Walking beside the dean was a woman, about thirty, wearing a mid-length brown skirt, matching blazer, and high-necked, striped blouse. Her face was a little drawn, but still pretty behind glasses with large oval frames. Instead of simply wearing glasses, it looked as if she was peering from behind two small, portable windows. She carried several books in one hand and a briefcase in the other.

After introductions, Baxter and the woman sat down. Her name was Anne Mumford. Among other things, she taught a course called Texts of World

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Philosophy. Dean Kelcher smiled like a candidate and excused himself to get some coffee.

Baxter reached into his coat pocket and removed a piece of crumpled yellow paper, which he laid on the table, smoothed out, and slid across to Professor Mumford. It was blank, except for some parallel lines in the center:



"Know what this is?" Baxter asked.

"Yes, of course. A hexagram from the I Ching, the ancient Chinese book of divination. I struggled through it with a class earlier in the semester. We're doing the Bhagavad-Gita now. Are you familiar with it?"

"Not really," Baxter said. "Tell me something. Do you know what this means?"

"Not offhand. There are sixty-four possible hexagrams in the system, each with its own meaning. I didn't memorize them. I could look it up for you, though. No, wait, my copy isn't here. It's at home now. You could try the library. I'm sure they have it."

Baxter took out his notebook and flipped it open to the first page.

"That's okay. I checked it out already. This one means freedom from error and recklessness; supposed to have something to do with a person who's simple and honest. The name for it is Wu Wang."

Dean Kelcher returned with two coffees, put one in front of her, waved at someone across the room, and excused himself again. Anne removed her glasses and chewed on one of the stems, looking thoughtfully at the hexagram. Then her eyes locked with Baxter's.

"If you know the interpretation, then what do you want with me? Bill, Dean Kelcher, says you're conducting an investigation of some kind."

Baxter reached across the table and retrieved the paper. He folded it and put it back in his pocket, then took a sip of his lukewarm coffee.

"I had a murder tossed in my lap yesterday. A bookie, nobody special. He was shot with a small caliber weapon at close range. The angle of entry is all wrong, like there was a scuffle of some kind and the gun went off. Near the body we found that piece of paper. Now, maybe it means nothing, but I think it's worth following up on."

"Well, Sergeant Baxter, as clues go, that seems pretty far-fetched. Certainly a bookmaker is concerned with predicting the future, in his own petty way, but I can't see how the I

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Ching would be much help. Its advice and predictions are vague at best. I sincerely doubt he could find the winner for the sixth race in one of the hexagrams, if that's what you're wondering."

Baxter shook his head. He wasn't sure himself what he was wondering. He was just throwing blades of grass up to see which way the wind was blowing.

"You're probably right about that," he said, "But I don't necessarily think it fell out of the bookie's pocket. It may have belonged to whomever he lost the fight to. The question is, where do we find somebody who would know both the bookie and the book?"

"I'm sorry I can't be of more assistance. I'm not quite sure what you're after. Do you suspect me?"

Baxter smiled, circled the top of his styrofoam cup with an index finger, then looked at her.

"I don't suspect anybody, professor. I'm just looking for a little cooperation, that's all."

"My students. You think one of them is a murderer?" she asked. There was a growing edge of irritation in her voice.

"It's worth a look, don't you think?"

Baxter used his best diplomatic tone. It didn't work.

"Sergeant, you're way off base if you think for a second that one of my kids could do such a thing. They wouldn't know anything about this bookie. Do you know how much it costs to go to school now? Most of these kids are just getting by, financially. They don't have the kind of extra cash a bookmaker would be interested in."

Baxter was a little surprised by the mother hen reaction. He wondered how she knew what kind of money would interest a bookie, but thought the question could wait.

"Professor Mumford, if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to meet with your class this afternoon, individually. Just a formality, you understand."

"No, I don't understand," she replied. "You'll have to arrange that through the office. Now, if there's nothing else . . . "

He left the faculty lounge and then the campus, glad to get away from that atmosphere as he pulled out into traffic on the main highway. Of course, he would have to come right back this afternoon.

The morning was warm for November, the sky bright and cloudless, clearer than his thinking.

Anne had lunch with Bill Kelcher. He wanted to hear all about her interrogation, as he called it, and seemed disappointed that she hadn't been told any more

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than he. This Sergeant Baxter was going to be a nuisance, she thought as Bill talked. He had already convinced Bill to cancel her Texts class this afternoon so he could question her kids. He was a sharpie, all right, with his thin foxface, those predatory gray eyes, and their emotionless, calculating stare. Despite his sloppy tweed wardrobe and friendly voice, he had intimidated her from the start. Anne shivered. She decided to change the subject.

"How's Margaret?" she asked.

"Much better, thanks. Doctor says it was just a bug. Nothing to worry about, I guess. She seemed pretty chipper this morning. Oh, now that you mention it, she'd like you and Tom to come over for brunch some weekend soon."

Anne frowned. She picked up her coffee cup and swished around the remnants.

"I'm surprised," she said. "After last time."

"Now, Anne. Don't be such a snob. You take these things too seriously. There's no reason your husband can't watch his football if he likes it so much. We had a nice time anyway, didn't we? And Margaret really enjoys your company."

"Some company. Tom numb in front of your television and me sulking at the table. I don't think any of us really want to go through all that again."

Bill shook his head, but smiled. Anne liked his fleshy, sympathetic face, perched on top of a body going comfortably to seed. His nickname ws Papa Bear. There were times when his simple willingness to listen was her most prized possession; times like now.

"We'll just have to plan ahead this time," he said with a wink. "I'll warm up the set before you get there. Tom can have his football while the three of us enjoy a pleasant afternoon. We don't mind, really."

"I don't know, Bill. I'll have to get back to you on that. If I come, it'll probably be alone. We're hardly even speaking any more. Gambling has taken my place as his first love, if it ever wasn't. He doesn't watch those games because he's a fan. It's for, what does he call it, the action on the side. I think the man is really sick . . . I'm not sure I have the patience or inclination any more . . . "

Baxter sat at his desk in the eye of a hurricane. The station was jammed with people, incoming and outgoing, but he didn't see them. He had shoved aside some of the junk on his desk and set the yellow scrap of paper in the space. While his mind buzzed with possibilities, he concentrated on the hexagram.

The college angle hadn't really

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helped. He had spent the afternoon talking individually with the kids in Professor Mumford's class. She was right. They seemed like a nice bunch. He knew in his gut when a real lead showed up, and that feeling hadn't come during the interviews.

But it had happened later, when he stopped to thank Dean Kelcher for his help. Once again he was stuck for ten or fifteen minutes in conversation. This time the subject was Professor Mumford. When Baxter mentioned that he thought he might have antagonized her earlier, Kelcher said that she was under a lot of stress at home.

As Baxter had learned from their previous conversation, Kelcher wasn't one to keep a secret, even from strangers. He said that Professor Mumford and her husband were on the verge of divorce, a situation she was taking very hard, despite her apparent calm and self-control.

Kelcher's face had flushed with anger as he talked about the husband. He listed one fault after another in describing the man, and only at the end of the list did the word "gambler" occur. Baxter asked him why he hadn't mentioned it before, considering the circumstances, but Kelcher shrugged and excused himself out of his own office.

It was checkout time. Baxter left the station and walked three blocks to Benny's Lounge, which was empty and dark. The chairs were leather padded and the bar highly polished wood, a hopeless attempt at class. Silver dollars were embedded in the bar, and deep gouges marred the surface where patrons had tried to free them. Everything reeked of stale tobacco.

"Hey, Benny, give me a scotch. Double," said Baxter.

"Don't call me Benny," the bartender snarled. He poured the drink and set it down with an authoritative thud on a cardboard coaster advertising another new light beer.

"Thanks," said Baxter, lighting a cigarette. He slid the coaster out from under his drink, took a pen from inside his coat, and drew the hexagram.

He wished Tony, his regular partner, were here. He'd been shot, though not seriously, the week before and was taking some time off. The department had given Baxter a substitute in the interim, but from day one with this new guy, he had decided he would rather work alone. Baxter kept sending him off on little errands to keep him out of the way. He couldn't even remember the kid's last name. His first was Ed . . . or Fred.

A woman came in and sat next to him, turned and smiled. Must be a hooker, he thought.

"Hi, hon. Buy a lady a drink?"

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"Why not," he replied without looking up. "Hey, Benny, something for the lady."

"Don't call me Benny."

The bartender didn't ask her what she wanted, but mixed a vodka tonic automatically. The lady had definitely been here before. She followed Baxter's gaze down to the coaster.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to the hexagram.

"Wu Wang."

"You in town on business?"

Evidently she didn't want to pursue her first line of questioning.

"Yeah. Producer, I Ching International Pictures. Doing a remake of *Gone with the Wind,* all Chinese cast . . . Big battle scene between two samurai being shot tomorrow out on the Meadows. This symbol's on the hero's shield . . . "

"No kidding," she sighed, then sipped her drink through the small cocktail straw. End of conversation.

Baxter thought about Professor Mumford. He thought about what Dean Kelcher had said. He thought about the husband.

He was getting that feeling.

The house was mercifully silent. Since Tom worked until four, Anne would have an hour's solitude. Normally, she stayed at school later, delaying her return home as long as possible, but today she felt the need to escape. Sergeant Baxter had upset her, and she needed time alone to recover.

She put Albinoni's Adagio in G on the stereo, poured a glass of burgundy, wrapped herself in a thick patchwork quilt, and curled up on the sofa. When the record ended, she replaced it with Joni Mitchell.

Maybe Bill was right. Maybe she did take everything too seriously. Look at her. She couldn't even do a simple thing like listen to music, but had to wear it instead, matching artist to mood like her mother used to choose handbags for hats.

She dragged herself upstairs to the bedroom and shed her clothes, like old skin, in a heap on the floor. She went into the bathroom and stood numbly under the steaming shower for fifteen minutes. As the water enveloped her, protected her, Anne remembered a similar afternoon two weeks ago, another of those rare days when she had come home early. After her shower, she had put on an old pair of bluejeans and hooded sweatshirt, straightened out the bedroom, and gone downstairs . . . no, halfway down . . . before she heard his car pull into the driveway and crouched on one of the stairs, hidden in the shadow behind the railing.

The kitchen door had creaked

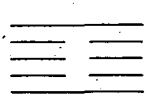
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open and banged shut. His lunch bucket hit the table. The refrigerator door opened. The top snapped off a beer can.

Tom entered the living room and set his beer on the coffee table. He took a few slips of paper from his jacket pocket and spread them out, along with a copy of the newspaper and her I Ching. Shoving the quilt out of his way, he had sat down on the couch with his back to her.

She edged forward to get a better view over his shoulder. He took three pennies from another pocket and shook them in his right hand, blowing on them like dice, while studying the paper. Then he dropped the coins on the table. They clattered and stopped; two heads and a tail; two points for each of the former, three for the latter; total value of seven, odd number, solid line.

He drew the line, then repeated the steps five more times until he had completed the hexagram:



But he had put the lines down from top to bottom, which was incorrect. The hexagram on paper wasn't the one he'd thrown.

He looked in the front of the I Ching at the table of interpretations, found the hexagram he had just completed, and scribbled a few words down.

"All right!" he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, chuckling to himself.

She was furious and scared. The show was over. It was time to come out of hiding.

"Who? Wha . . . Oh, it's you. What're you doing home so early? Where's your car? I didn't see it out front."

She walked down the remaining stairs slowly. When she reached the bottom, she turned and looked at him. Her voice was calm and clear.

"My car is in the shop. I caught an early bus. What are you doing with my book, Tom?"

"Oh this? Uh, you won't believe it, but I think I stumbled on the Golden Goose here."

His voice was higher and more excited than she'd ever heard it. He looked like a prize student showing off his class project, which angered her even more.

"You left this book out one night last month. I happened to notice the cover said something about predicting. Well, I've tried everything else, so I thought why not this? . . . Now, don't look at me like that, Annie. I followed the directions, sort of, and bet accordingly."

"But the I Ching has nothing to do with that kind of predicting. It's . . . "

"It's all in the way you read

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it. Look, look at this one I just shot. It's called Meng, means . . ." He picked up the piece of paper and read what he had put down. "Um, means youthful and inexperienced. Now I'd been leaning toward the Knicks tonight until I saw this, but I think it's worth taking a shot with Dallas and the points, y'know? I tell you, Annie, I've been on such a roll like you wouldn't believe. It's the Mother Lode. You had no idea all this time what you were playing around with."

She was gradually making her way across the room, keeping her distance, alert like a wary prey near a preoccupied foe. Something told her not to challenge him, not to rock the sinking boat, but she lost the argument with herself and spoke anyway.

"Tom, I think you're missing the point . . ."

"I knew it! Here it comes, folks! God, can't you just once not give me the lecture routine. The first time I ever tried this, I could hear your whining voice in the back of my head. Why do you think I hid it from you? I'm not one of your damned schoolboys, lady. Here! Take it if you're gonna be like that. I'll get my own."

He threw the book violently across the room, but not at her. It crashed against the corner of the TV set, breaking the spine and scattering a few pages on the carpet. She pushed at the kitchen door, looked over at him, and spoke in a soft voice.

"I-I'm going to fix something to eat," she said, as if such a statement would come close to filling this new silence, this awful silence, that had suddenly fallen between them.

"Ate already."

"But . . ."

"No!"

Their longest conversation in weeks ended like that. Tom picked up his papers and stormed upstairs. A door slammed and something fell to the floor. She retreated to the kitchen.

She heated a can of soup, but couldn't swallow a drop and poured it down the sink. Her hands were trembling and the soup bowl nearly shattered when she tried to rinse it out. Holding on to the sink with both hands, she stared out the kitchen window at neighborhood kids playing baseball under a dim streetlight. She took a deep breath, then another, refusing to cry. He wasn't worth it.

Baxter tried to remember the word for being in a place and feeling like you've been there before. Only this time it was almost true. He was sitting at the same table in the faculty lounge,

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waiting for Professor Mumford again. His coffee was fresh. He wasn't used to that, having always thought it just naturally was supposed to taste a week old.

It had been only a few days since he'd last been here, but when she finally entered, he felt somebody should introduce them. She was dressed in a similar style, though a color here and there had changed. Baxter thought she looked slightly different in another way, too, as if something were bothering her.

"Sergeant Baxter. Sorry I'm late. Car trouble. Dean Kelcher said you were looking for me. I have a class that started without me two minutes ago. Would you mind if we talked later?"

"No. When's a good time?"

She frowned. Baxter thought she looked like a woman holding herself under tight rein. She was standing straight and met his eyes directly, but he read tension not far beneath the surface.

"I have classes straight through today and a department meeting this afternoon . . . I don't suppose you could come out to my house this evening."

She had seen too many TV cop shows, Baxter thought, where they worked twenty-four hours a day. He could insist that she meet with him this afternoon. He could insist that she skip her class now. He could even take her downtown. Instead, he nodded and wrote her address in his notebook.

She hurried away. Baxter headed for the parking lot. He had to talk this over with his partner.

Anne spent an hour in the ladies' room after her first class. She cried, unable to recall the last time she had allowed herself that luxury. The small room was cold and reeked of disinfectant; an appropriate setting for the autopsy of a marriage, of a way of life.

How long had she kidded herself? Their fifth and last anniversary was approaching. She couldn't pretend that every year had been unpleasant. Although they were opposite in too many respects, for a while that had seemed more intriguing than irritating. Tom was a heavy gambler even when they met, but since they both worked hard, it had never been an issue until now. His addiction had seemed more boring than anything else.

Boredom. That was what she thought she was escaping when they met. As the only child of a professor, her entire life had been spent on campuses. Tom represented that other world, where flesh and blood took precedence over words and ideas.

But her life was unchange-

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ably linked to thought and his to action. The two of them acquired the antagonistic nature of flint and steel, though the sparks resulting did not produce flames of passion.

Still, she thought, it had dragged on like that for a long time, and probably would have continued if it hadn't been for the book. He had trespassed there. She wouldn't forgive him that. Nothing could ever be the same between them.

By two o'clock, Baxter had finished his paperwork and was leaving. He called his partner to make sure he was home, then called it a day.

Tony Giulla lived alone in a ridiculously big ranch house in the suburbs. His street was littered with tricycles, dogs, and kids. Baxter drove slowly, negotiating this slalom course, until he finally pulled into Tony's driveway.

You couldn't miss the house, he thought as he shut off the engine and got out of his car. Tony's lawn was a couple of inches higher than anybody else's. His scraggly fruit trees out front were barren and untended. There weren't any toys in the yard and his was the only garage on the street without a basketball hoop.

Tony had bought the place fifteen years ago. His wife wanted kids, but not in the city. She wanted everything safe and storybook perfect. Then cancer took her a year later, and Tony was stranded out here.

Baxter knocked, and the door immediately opened. Tony smiled out of his dark, craggy face, but couldn't shake hands because his arm was in a sling.

"Saw you pull in, partner," he said, moving aside as Baxter entered. "What brings you to God's country? Thought you got a rash when you stayed away from pavement too long."

Baxter grinned as he looked the place over. Whenever he came out here, he was always surprised by how neatly Tony kept it. This big house was cleaner than his own little apartment in the city. But that's why they were good partners. Tony had the orderly mind, Baxter the gut feelings and ability to look under rocks nobody else would turn. Tony sorted it all out and looked for the connections.

They went into the kitchen, where a new lawnmower lay half assembled on the shiny tile floor. Tony slipped his arm out of the sling and picked up a piece of metal tubing, which he placed over a hole on the side of the mower.

"Hold this here, willya?" he said.

Baxter leaned over and held the tubing while Tony slid a small bolt through the holes

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and twisted on a wing nut from underneath. He winced when he moved his arm too quickly.

"Shouldn't you use the sling?" Baxter asked, wondering as he did so why he bothered.

"Naaa," Tony replied. "So, Harry, what's going on? What brings you way out here? Where's your new partner?"

"That kid. I wish they'd leave me in peace until you get back. I keep sending him on chases so I can work, but damned if he don't always come back."

He filled his partner in on the details of the case as they finished assembling the mower. He showed him the hexagram and told him what it meant. Tony turned the paper sideways and upside down during the explanation, as if there were other possibilities. Then he poured them each a drink at the kitchen counter, slipped his arm back into the sling, and led the way into the living room. They sat in leather recliners, facing one another. Baxter swallowed his scotch in a single gulp, set the glass down, lit a cigarette, and watched his partner sip at his drink, then stare into the glass like it was a crystal ball. He spoke in slow, measured tones.

"You talk to the college kids?"

"Yeah. Nothing there, I don't think."

"How about another college."

"Only two more in the city. I checked and they don't have any courses using this book."

"How about this teacher? Mumford, was it?"

"She's a possibility, I guess. The real piece of meat there is that her husband's a heavy punter from way back."

Tony looked up with an expression that said "What else do you need to know," then looked down again. It wasn't that easy.

"You talk to any other books?"

"I hit on a couple early this afternoon and sent the kid after some others. The word I get is nothing special on this guy. He was your basic, respectable neighborhood businessman. Nothing big on his sheet downtown. Middle class, mostly suburban clientele, from what I hear. Telephone accounts."

"Like your Mr. Mumford?"

"Who knows? His 'associates' made sure whatever records he had were long gone by the time we showed up."

"Nice to have friends. What's your next move?"

"Going out to the Mumford house after I leave here."

"Working late?" Tony said with a smile.

"Yeah, well, I tried to talk with her earlier today, but that's one busy lady. And this'll give me a chance to size up the old man."

"Was it your idea to go out there tonight?"

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"No, hers."

"Did she tell you her husband was a gambler?"

"No. It was that dean at the college. I guess he's a friend of hers, though."

"Lover?"

"Don't think so."

Tony jumped up and, taking both glasses, went to the kitchen for a refill. When he returned, Baxter thought he saw a decision in Tony's expression. He accepted the drink and this time they both drained their glasses. It was time to go.

"You won't have to look much farther than that house tonight, if you ask me," said Tony.

"I agree, though Kelcher's still on my list."

"Are we talking conscience with any of these people?"

"I don't know about the husband. I'd say yes with the other two."

"When was the last time you were invited to the house of a suspect?"

"I'll tell you, Tony. I don't think she knows she's a suspect. I'm not sure myself. I went to her just for help at first. None of my questioning so far has been aimed at her. If I hadn't heard from Kelcher about her husband's connections, I probably would have passed right on by."

Tony opened the door and Baxter stepped out on the lawn.

"Wish I could get back into the lineup, partner. But since I can't, I'll at least offer my game plan. Remember when we played baseball as kids and at least once a game the first baseman and pitcher would have a meeting? The pitcher would slip the ball into the first baseman's glove and they'd try to trap the runner into taking a lead?"

"I remember."

"I think you could do worse here than employ your own version of the old hidden ball trick."

Tony always talked like that. He never came right out and said what he meant. It was strange. The only thing stranger was that Baxter usually knew just what he was getting at.

The evening was, appropriately, somber and wet. Anne sat on the couch, sipping wine, the quilt gathered snugly around her shoulders. She was trying to recreate the oasis of calm and solitude she had found there before, but couldn't. Her nerves were shot. The valium dulled her tension somewhat, but couldn't dissipate it. On the coffee table was Tom's new copy of the I Ching, stuffed with yellow paper. Exhibit A.

This wasn't working as she had planned, though. Usually Wednesday night was one of the few Tom spent at home. For some reason he was still out. She would have to face Ser-

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geant Baxter alone, tell him what her husband had done, destroy him without facing him.

When the doorbell chimed, she set her glass on the coffee table and went to answer it. Sergent Baxter was on the steps, his hat and coat soaking wet. She took his things, hanging them in the entryway cloakroom where they dripped steadily on the floor.

They walked together into the living room. Anne returned to the couch, tucked her feet under her, and again wrapped herself in the quilt's warm cocoon. The detective sank into a large, overstuffed chair and took a notebook out of his jacket pocket. Anne watched him flip through a few pages. She didn't want to be the first to speak, even about the weather. It had to be all his doing. The quilt camouflaged her trembling hands.

"Professor Mumford," he finally began, "I just wanted to follow up on a couple things. You said your I Ching class was when, September, October?"

"Early October, yes."

"And everybody in it would have had his own copy?"

Anne was prepared for any line of questioning but this one. Why was he backtracking? Bill must have told him about Tom's gambling by now. Wasn't he smart enough to follow through on that?

"I thought when you talked to my class, that was the end of their involvement in this," she said.

"Why else would I come way out here to talk to you if it wasn't about your class?"

Anne started to reach for her wine, hesitated, decided not to try. Baxter was underlining something, and spoke without looking up.

"I won't mention names, but you do have a kid who looks like a real possibility. He's smart, kind of a wise guy, but showed some interest in the fine art of handicapping. He said it was strictly for fun, but . . . "

"Not Phil Duncan! You can't mean . . . "

"It's a possibility, ma'am," said Baxter, turning to the next page. "No alibi for the night in question, possible motive. I admit it's a long shot, but that's why I'm here tonight. I want to know anything about him that might help. Tomorrow I'll talk to his other teachers, probably get hold of his parents . . . "

"But he didn't do it!" Anne cried, her mind blurring momentarily under the pressure. "Sergeant, I have to tell you something. I think I know who the murderer is. I just didn't want to be the one who . . . My husband had been using my I Ching to make his bets for a couple of months. I just discovered it recently. When I heard

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about the killing, and then you came, I didn't know what to do."

She reached for the book and removed several sheets of yellow notepaper, then handed them to Baxter, who had come over to look at them. She sat back, tightened the quilt around her, and watched him inspect the papers. His features, at first interested and expectant, changed to a harder look of doubt.

"Hmmm . . . Similar kind of paper, all right. But the hexagram on the one at the scene didn't have all these words on it. Every one of these has words he must have copied from the book."

"But he could have done that on purpose, to cover his tracks," she said, as calmly as she could manage.

"No, I don't think so. He wouldn't have left it there on purpose, knowing it could lead right back to him. And if it fell out of his pocket, it should be just like the others, shouldn't it?"

"But I'm sure it's him!"

Baxter looked down on her from an imposing height. He turned back a couple of pages in his notebook, checked something, then returned to his chair. He left the papers scattered across the coffee table.

"Professor Mumford, if you were so certain your husband was a murderer, how could you stay in the same house? Weren't you scared?"

"He's my husband."

"That's not the best reason I ever heard. I was told you two weren't that close."

So Bill had talked after all, she thought. In that case, how stupid could this man be, not to see the connections?

"We had our problems, that's true, but for some reason I wasn't frightened. He never threatened me or anything."

The detective looked around the room slowly, then focused on her. She tried to meet his gaze, but managed only to look at the bridge of his nose.

"I don't think it was your husband. It's too damned convenient. Now, what about this Duncan kid? Did he know your husband? Could he have had a crush on you?"

Anne squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold back tears, but aggravating the condition instead. She looked up and met his stare directly. From each eye, a tear flowed down her cheek. Her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Leave my kids out of this, sergeant. . . . I was the one who . . . I didn't mean to kill anyone. When Tom started using my book for that lousy purpose, it was like he was abusing me personally. I had to fight back. It was stupid, but I thought I could scare off a couple of his

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bookies, tell them not to take any more of his bets. Not that it would stop him, but at least I would get an eye for an eye, more or less. . . . It was dumb, I know. . . . That little guy, I couldn't believe he tried to bully me even though I had the gun. . . . He went to take it from me, we struggled, and . . . I left the hexagram out of rage. I felt Tom had driven me to that awful place and I wanted revenge badly. I hated him . . . I hate him, but I won't let you hurt my kids. I won't let you . . ."

He finished writing the report around midnight and called Tony, who said conscience was a wonderful thing. Baxter wasn't so pleased.

Sometimes you felt worse for the perpetrator than you did for the victim. It wasn't a good feeling to have in his business, but he was stuck with it this time.

He headed for Benny's Lounge, which was busy, at least for Benny's. A dozen people sat stonefaced at the bar. The jukebox was playing Sinatra. They had probably all been sitting like that for hours. It was Baxter's kind of crowd.

"Hey, Benny. Give me a scotch, double."

"Don't call me Benny," said a new bartender.

Fortunately, some things never changed.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

Clues like this might leave a sleuth feeling a little flat-footed (not to mention the disappear-ee). We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

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The POISON FLOWERS

by Anita McBride

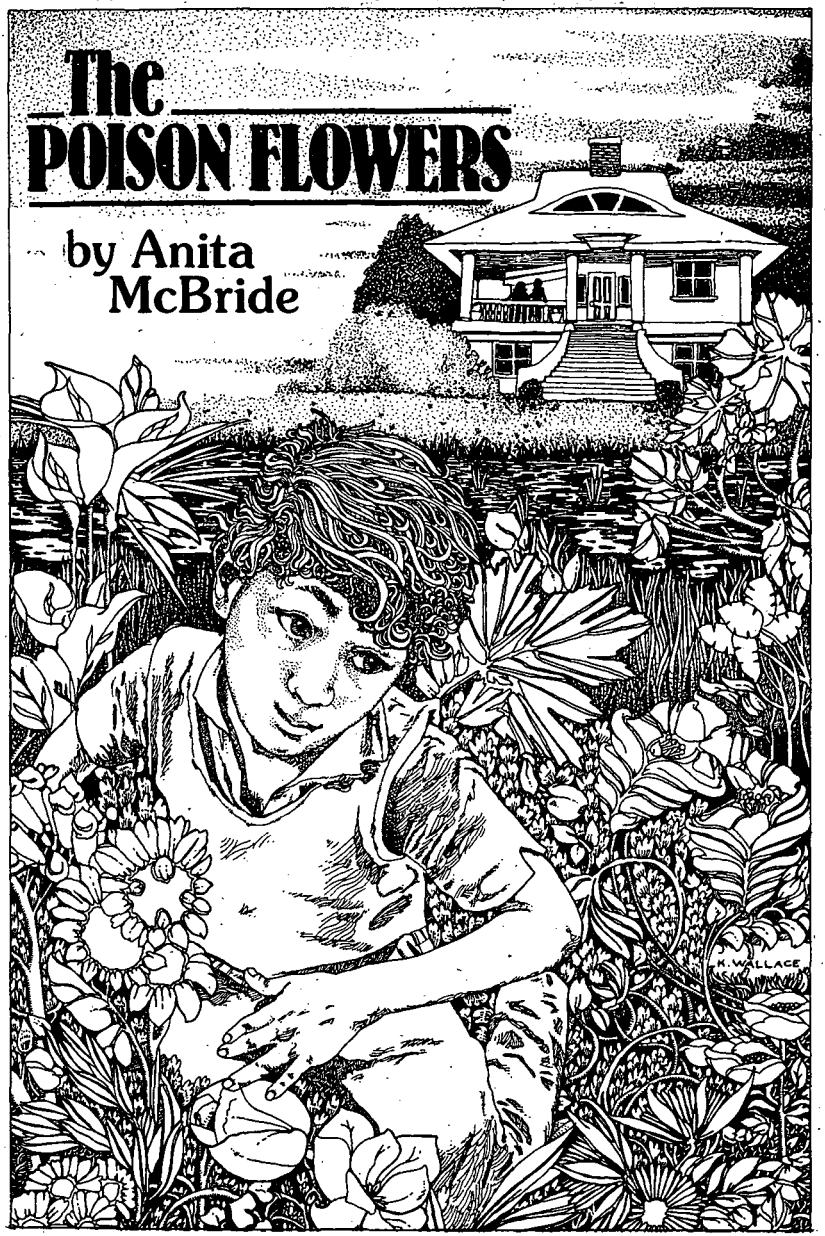


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

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I've thought about it one hundred times. One hundred times. It happened three years ago, right after my mother married Al. I was eleven years old, but not a smart eleven. Just an ordinary kid.

I was glad she married Al and that I could say what my new father did without making things up. My mother had explained how my real father's name was on my birth certificate but it wasn't the same as if they'd been married, and anyway he moved out before I could walk. He's not a part of this story. When other boys asked where he was, I said the army. I always pretended she was a Mrs. even though she claimed I needn't feel that way with women's lib and all.

When my mother married Al, she and I got to leave our dinky little room in Chicago, and we all went up to Al's cottage in Wisconsin.

Cloverdale, long ago, was built as a summer resort, but it isn't much now. The lake is choked with weeds in places. The cottages are built all alike. There was a narrow screened-in porch across the front; I liked sleeping on the iron cot there, and I could run the inside awnings up and down if I wanted to. At night the sky was covered with stars, stars I'd never noticed in Chicago. Inside, we had a space heater in the living room and an old oak dining room table, some chairs and a sofa. There was a bedroom and a tiny kitchen with a kerosene stove. Al lived in Cloverdale all year round. Most of the neighbors did, too. Only Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey had a house in the city. He owned Clover Lake and all the cottages.

Across the road from the Ramseys, the Marshes had a truck farm. When we moved in with Al, Mr. Marsh brought over a basket of fresh vegetables, and Mrs. Marsh had put a bouquet of yellow flowers on our table. A welcome to Cloverdale.

The Ramseys' cottage was just around the bend in the lake from where Al lived. Mrs. Ramsey had dark curly hair and used cherry red lipstick. She wore a white dress sometimes with a red patent leather belt, and she always smelled like perfume. Al used to raise his eyebrows in a way that made me laugh when I'd mention her.

I have to explain that Al worked at a local factory on the night shift. My mother was on the early day shift, so she was ready to leave when he got home. I know they worked these lonesome hours so that one of them was always home for me.

After Al left for work, my mother and I stayed up for a while, and we would say how lucky we were to be there and how Al was a great guy. I didn't have to be told that he was a mile better than

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my real father. Pretty soon, we'd go to bed. But I didn't stay there. I used to get up, real quiet, put on my clothes and sneak out the screen door, and walk down the sandy dirt road in the moonlight.

It was so peaceful and mysterious, that country road, barely wide enough for a car, and I'd creep up on the other cottages and see what I could see. Or hear. This one night when the heavens were sparkling—the Milky Way, the Big Dipper—I was stalking shadows, Al's gray and white old mother cat running along in front, pausing sometimes to check that I was following, her eyes like neon in the starlight.

I rounded the woods that separated our place from the Ramseys'. Their dark green cottage sat snug in the birch and pine woods with moonlight shining on the lake behind. Mr. Ramsey was a big man and he'd had a bit of bad luck. He'd broken his leg and so I hadn't been surprised to discover on a previous peek around that Mrs. Ramsey was sleeping on a cot on the screened-in porch just like I did at Al's.

As I started my scouting toward the house, I could hear a muffled laughing, and I got up close to the side of the porch to see what was so funny.

Mrs. Ramsey wasn't alone. A man was crouched on the floor at the head of the bed and he had his head next to hers and they were whispering and laughing, and this is what I heard.

"He said it tasted delicious—" She broke off to laugh, a pretty sound, trying to smother it in the sheet.

"He said the casserole was delicious?" His low murmur of amusement mingled with hers, and I caught the shine of his white teeth. "How does he feel? That stuff's supposed to do a job!"

"He said he loved it." She sure laughed pretty, like music it was. He nuzzled his face into her neck and there was more merriment, but it was snuffed out because there came a sound from the bedroom of bedsprings being disturbed, and then the clatter of Mr. Ramsey's crutches and the hop of his good leg.

"He'll kill us if he sees you," Mrs. Ramsey said. "Oh God!"

The man on the porch squeezed himself in between the head of the bed and the wall. I pressed my face against the screen.

"Who are you talking to? What's going on out here?" Mr. Ramsey said. He was standing in the cottage doorway, looking out at the porch. He looked seven feet tall.

I spoke up. "It's me, Mr. Ramsey," I said.

"Who are you, boy?" His voice rumbled out into the dark night and Al's cat ran up a pine tree as quick as a wink.

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"Wadsworth," I said, taking the poet's middle name. Sometimes it doesn't pay to tell the truth.

Mrs. Ramsey was as still as though she were under a magician's spell, and the man on the floor was just a dark shadow against the wall and half under the bed.

"Is that your last name?"

"Yes, sir," I said, and justified the little white lie because it was the last time I had said a name.

"Your people know you're out?" He made a gagging sound and bent over.

"No, sir." I could see he was real sick.

"You get yourself home, boy, and never come here bothering folks again." He could hardly get the words out.

I beat it, but not before I saw Mrs. Ramsey throw back the sheet and help the poor guy into the cabin.

"Oh, Minnie, oh, Minnie," the old man was saying.

Her body looked as white as milk. I was surprised she could sleep with hardly any clothes on like that. It gets plenty chilly during the night.

The next morning, I saw Mr. Jensen out in back of our house when I went out. Mother had gotten breakfast and gone to work, and Al had come home and eaten what she'd put out for him, and had gone to bed.

Well, I was surprised to see Mr. Jensen, the sun glinting on his shiny black hair. He operated a dancehall about halfway between the resort and the nearest town. I used to walk over there sometimes and buy a candy bar. You could buy candy and cigarettes and play a slot machine there. Mr. Jensen was always hail-fellow-well-met, like they say.

Mr. Jensen looked glad to see me when I came out and walked over to see what he wanted. He wanted to use Al's canoe that was overturned on the beach. The paddles were propped against the house next to Al's fishing poles.

"You're Ralph, aren't you? You look like a smart young one." No one had ever said that to me before, and of course it made me feel good. "Do you think we could borrow your dad's boat for half an hour? I'll give you a dollar to come with me."

"I don't know." Al had never let me take the canoe. They tip awful easy and I think he was afraid I'd swamp it in the deep water. That means fill it with water and of course then it would sink.

"Dad's asleep. He just got home from work."

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I liked calling Al Dad. Al liked it, too.

"Well, let's not wake him up." Mr. Jensen gave me a wide smile, and picked the paddles ever so gently away from the side of the house.

Just then the doctor's car went by, going toward the Ramseys' house. Carpenter was a nice old guy, retired except for helping his neighbors, and we had only ten cottages.

I felt kind of guilty, but I didn't want to disappoint Mr. Jensen, so I went with him down to the shore where the minnows were chasing each other in the green water near the edge.

"You're a city boy, aren't you?" he said, giving me a friendly look. I recognized then that Mr. Jensen was the man on the porch with Mrs. Ramsey, and I figured he wanted to give me the ridiculously big sum of a dollar for just half an hour in the canoe because he appreciated what I had done for him last night. I gave him a big grin back.

"Did you ever learn to swim?" he asked.

"Learn to swim?" said I, feeling like a smarty pants. "No, I never learned to swim." Because, you see, I was born knowing how to swim. My mother explained it to me, about there being water in the womb, my natural habitat, and how she dunked me in the YMCA pool when I was an infant and I took off like an eel.

He didn't say I should run back to the house for a life jacket or anything like you might expect, just motioned me into the canoe, and with a few strong strokes, we were in the middle of the lake where it's about five hundred feet wide. He looked this way and that, like he wanted to see if anybody was about, and all of a sudden he began to clown around, rocking the canoe hard, first one way, then the other. I shouted for him to stop—Al would be furious—but over she went and I was in the brown-colored water, and I went down deep, believe me, all the way to the mud bottom.

I came up with my hair all clotted in front of my eyes and I could see Mr. Jensen treading water, looking at me. Well, maybe it was mean, but after his goofy, silly behavior I decided to give him a good scare, so I flailed my arms around and kind of gasped for help. He just kept staring, sort of hypnotized, so I let myself sink under the water. When I came up again, he had moved toward the shore, but he'd been waiting, sure enough, for me to come up. This time I just got my eyes above water and sank again. I could see the shadow of the overturned canoe, and I swam underwater toward it and came up under it where I could breathe. I could hardly keep from laughing, but it was a good lesson for Mr. Jensen to learn not

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to fool around in a canoe.

When I came out from my hiding place, I saw that Mr. Jensen had gone, probably to spread the alarm for me, and I put the canoe back on the beach and went up to the house. After a while, I woke Al and told him what had happened, except not about last night because he would have said not to go out alone that late. He said I shouldn't have frightened Mr. Jensen like that, but he was mad at him because I'd lost one of my shoes in the water. He said that Mr. Jensen was a damned fool and I should make him give me a dollar. Then he went back to sleep.

When he woke up and I asked him, he said the reason Mr. Jensen hadn't spread the alarm was because he knew I was only fooling. I didn't think so. I thought he felt too guilty, it being all his fault.

That evening we learned that Mr. Ramsey had died. That made me feel bad. After Al left for work and my mother had gone to bed, I lay on the cot and looked up where white clouds were drifting across the moon and I supposed that Mr. Ramsey was up there someplace.

I didn't much like going out that night, but after a while I began to wonder if Mr. Jensen would be there with Mrs. Ramsey. Like Al said, he owed me a dollar. Besides, it was time I let him know that I was still alive. Fun's fun, but you don't have to be mean about it. So I got my shorts and T-shirt back on and an old pair of shoes, and let myself out.

I came up to the Ramsey house scout style, not making a whisper of noise. They were laughing again, like when Mr. Ramsey was taken sick. You know how it is, eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves, right?

"Someone brought the boat in," Mr. Jensen said.

"He's not much but you'd think they'd wonder where he is." Mrs. Ramsey must have thought she was being funny and Mr. Jensen laughed to please her.

"They both work, they probably don't know what the boy is up to half the time," he said.

That's not true. Either one or the other, Al or my mother, is home with me all the time. I got a heavy feeling in my chest and tears in my eyes. Who were they to talk about Al and my mother like that?

That was the end of the conversation. I could see that they were going to hug and kiss and they'd forgotten about me. They thought I was sitting on the muddy bottom of Clover Lake. How do you like that? That's all I meant to them, and after I kept Mr. Ramsey from,

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finding out that Mr. Jensen was there.

I did another mean thing.

I went around to the back of the cottage and let myself into the kitchen, and then into the bedroom. Sure enough, Mr. Ramsey's crutches were standing against the wall. I threw myself onto the bed, and the springs let out a wail that I knew would galvanize them out on the porch. Then I grabbed the crutches and made that crutch, hop, crutch, hop sound that I'd heard last night.

I heard the screen door fly open as Mr. Jensen hightailed it away, and Mrs. Ramsey started to scream. The screams, a couple of octaves higher than an opera star, ran along my nerves like a buzz saw. I dropped the crutches before I got to the cottage door, and ran out the way I'd come in.

The next afternoon I was sitting on the beach behind our cottage watching a box turtle sunning himself on a log that stuck out of the water. It was real hot and the sky was as blue as those flowers that grow along the wayside. "You don't want to touch those," Mr. Marsh had said. "The green leaves are poisonous, the roots fatal." I never went in touching distance of those flowers, dancing on long stems in a light breeze, the flowers almost purple, they were so blue.

I watched the turtle sunning himself for a long time, and finally I threw a pebble so it splashed about ten feet from him, and he slid into the lake so fast he could have given lessons to a rabbit. I loved being at Al's place. I sure didn't want to cause any trouble for him with the neighbors. After a while, I knew I'd have to go over and tell Mrs. Ramsey that I was sorry about the trick I played on Mr. Jensen. I was too ashamed to mention fooling around with her husband's crutches.

The fastest way for me to get to Mrs. Ramsey was to swim over because her beach was right next to Al's, just around the bend of woods. The cool water felt like it was holding me up and parting before me like for the Israelites as I took easy, lazy strokes to carry me around the bend.

There sat Mrs. Ramsey, wearing a few wisps of bathing suit and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a satiny bow tied under her chin. She had a bottle of oil in her white hands, and she was applying it in gentle sweeps up her legs and thighs, like she was loving putting it on. She looked so pretty sitting there that when I got right in front of her, about thirty feet out in the lake, I treaded water so I could watch what she was doing. I swear I meant no harm.

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She looked up, like you do sometimes when you sense someone watching, and when her eyes met mine through the hair across my face, her mouth opened and no sound came out, but her eyes rolled up and she fell over backwards.

I swam and splashed through the water, my toes finally squishing in the mud until they reached sand, and clambered to her side as fast as I could go, but she was out cold, lying there breathing in a heavy way, and I could see the whites of her eyes through her half-closed lids.

I ran up the sandy track through wild grass and shot right past her cottage, and there was Mr. Marsh across the road, standing in a patch of corn. He was a part-time policeman for Cloverdale, not that we needed one. I ran up to him and threw my arms around his waist. I couldn't talk for a minute or so, I felt so bad.

Mr. Marsh put his arms around my shoulders and got the whole story out of me, starting with Mrs. Ramsey fainting on the beach, and then going back to my supposed drowning and what I'd heard on my nightly rounds.

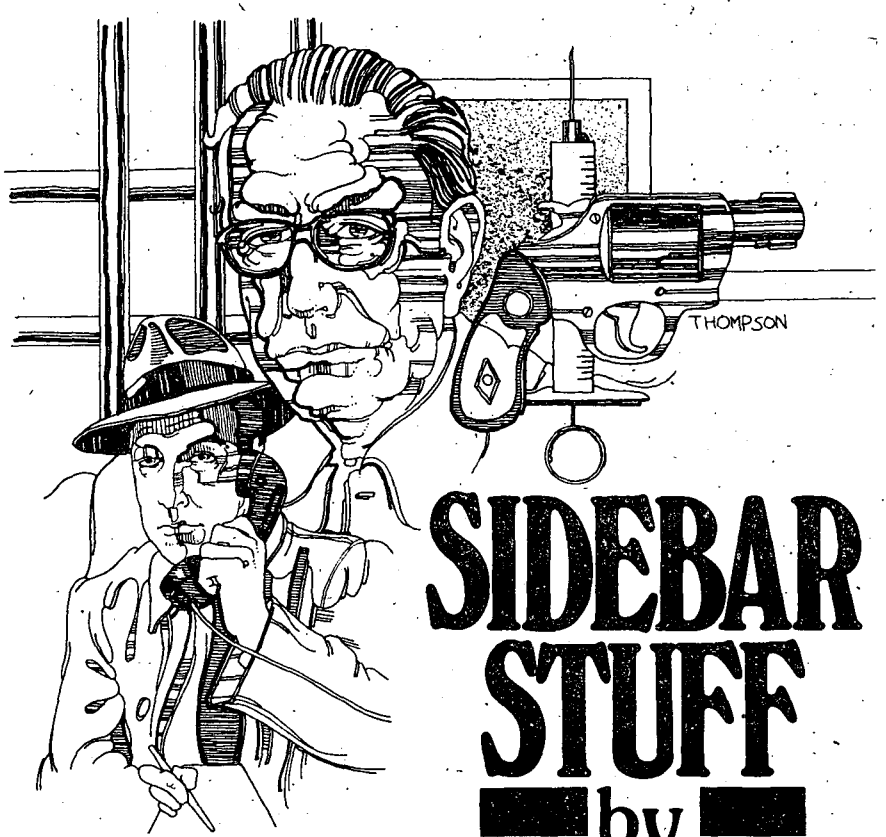
That's pretty much the end of my story. Mr. Marsh rode in the ambulance with Mrs. Ramsey to the hospital, and she confessed to him that she and Mr. Jensen had poisoned her husband. They're both in prison now. Mrs. Marsh took me to town and bought me a soda.

My midnight rambles are ended, but often Al takes a stroll down the road under the stars with me before he leaves for work, and my mother bought a telescope and put it on a tripod in the yard.

You might say that this terrible experience was a very bad thing to happen to an impressionable boy. Some people said that. But there was a relative of Mr. Ramsey's who ended up being the poor old guy's heir, which he hadn't expected to be, and this gentleman put a handsome sum of money into the bank for my education. So you see, there's a chance one day I'm going to be really smart.

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SIDEBAR STUFF

by Tim Counts

They all testified that J.T. Walmsley was a mean-tempered old man, especially mean when he was drinking, although he wasn't drinking the afternoon he murdered his wife and grandson. Still, some said, he was mean, so mean that the murdered woman's sister blurted out from the witness box that she couldn't think of a civilized way to execute him that would match the cruelty of the man and his crime. The outburst stirred the judge to warn the young prosecutor to control his witness and the defense to argue

Illustration by George Thompson

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that if you knew him you wouldn't think he was so bad. The jury countered with a guilty verdict, and everybody but the defense attorney was happy—the state had a conviction and the prosecuting attorney had another reason to continue thinking of himself and his logic as significant forces in American jurisprudence. I was pleased because the early decision left me time to meet the telephone date I had made with the only contact I'd managed to come up with in a dope-dealing investigation I was doing for the newspaper. The narcotics activity had slowed lately—stopped, according to my editor—but my interest continued.

On another level, I was pleased as a man can be who'd managed to move down the ladder of success to reporter on a rural edition for a mid-sized American daily newspaper and who'd just watched a hot young lawyer put one over the fence, overseeing the end of whatever plans might have been made by an old man who'd murdered his last known relatives. J.T. Walmsley, my story had said six months ago, hit his wife Maude on the head with the cast-iron skillet she had used to cook for him the half-century she lived with him before she moved out of the trailer to go live with her sister, and then shot his grandson, Curtis James. Shot him with the snub-nosed .38 he kept in the kitchen cabinet of the trailer he lived in at the time with the boy.

Whatever ambitions J.T. Walmsley might have had, he wasn't taking them into account the afternoon he killed Maude and Curtis—or Curtis and Maude. It was never clear during testimony and remarks who was first to die. The jury was satisfied with the prosecutor's theory: J.T. Walmsley killed his wife with the skillet and then shot the grandson when the boy, terrified and without judgment, went after the old man. I wondered why the old man hadn't hit Curtis James with the skillet and waited in vain for the defense attorney to ask why and give the prosecutor something to worry over. Without an official version, I wrote into my notes that an eighteen-year-old boy can handle a seventy-three-year-old man with a skillet in a way a seventy-year-old woman can't, and that the old man had the good sense to realize it but not the good sense to avoid killing him. Sidebar stuff.

Having killed his wife and grandson, J.T. had time to think about what he had done and what he was going to do about it. In the time it took the police to arrive after a customer, waiting in the Walmsleys' store near the trailer, heard the shot, and in the time it took the police to coax him out of the trailer, J.T. had decided to put up resistance. He was pitifully ineffective. When he finally stepped down from the trailer with the .38 gripped at his side, he

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refused to obey commands, according to the officers who reached him first. He refused to give up the gun, to spread his legs, even to raise his arms above his shoulders to be searched. They had to handcuff him to a small tree on the grounds between the trailer and the store. Photographs presented by the defense showing abrasions and cuts on the old man's hands did not win him sympathy from the jury. J.T. Walmsley was a mean-tempered old man.

I wrote the jury-decision lead and drove to Thelma's Mid-Town Cafe. Thelma was talking to a customer, so I went to the back where the ceiling fans moved the air and waited for the call from my contact. Thelma brought me a beer, said something that made me feel better, and left when she saw I had something on my mind.

"Contact" was a coldly professional term to tack onto a sixteen-year-old kid, but kids these days weren't exactly kids any more. When the youngster wouldn't give me a number where I could reach her, I had given her Thelma's pay phone number and a time to call. My big idea was to expose the local drug scene and make things better for everybody. I had convinced the girl I wasn't interested in getting the kids in trouble. My focus was distribution.

The phone rang. It was the girl.

"This is Whitney Collins," I said.

She tried to sound tough, but I heard a little girl. She wanted to make sure I understood that the reason she was talking to me was that her kid sister in junior high was a user already, and she didn't think that was right, and she wanted to do something to maybe help her stop 'cause she liked her kid sister, you know? I knew. I'd listened to people tell their sorrows for a lot of years. You might as well know that my distaste for hearing about them in the first place is as good a reason as any I'm going the direction I'm going on the ladder I mentioned before.

Most of what she told me wasn't new. She said the purchase points were floating stations: a buy could never be made in the same place twice. That was true, however, only for the guys who supplied the kids. The kids, who weren't smart, did business in school bathrooms and were easily caught. The big supplier had never been caught and, for a reason I did not know, had been lying low lately. His absence had made me grab at straws and go looking among the teenies for somebody to talk to. As I said, not much was new, but one thing she said sat me upright in the chair in Thelma's cafe. The big drop, she said, the one I'd be interested in, was off the bag lady. That was interesting and different, so I asked her about the bag lady. The girl thought a second and said that since the bag lady was dead there'd be no harm in telling. The bag lady

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had supplied those who supplied the kids. The little girl quickly told me she wasn't one of the former. She just smoked it; she didn't sell it. She said the bag lady ran this store out in the middle of nowhere east of town. To make a pickup, a buyer had to go into the store and ask for a bag of groceries, specifically, a loaf of bread, a roll of bologna, and night crawlers, like he was going fishing. The old lady would disappear out the back door and return in a jiffy, carrying fisherman's delight. Outside and far away from the store, the contents were dumped. If there was anything to sell on the playground, it would be found at the bottom under the bag of night crawlers. If not, The Disappointed could always have a sandwich, go fishing, and come back next week.

It was a breakthrough, but it still wasn't the best part. I asked her about the payoff. Simple. The night after you found the goodies in the grocery bag, you'd drive by the store when it was closed and everything was dark and leave the money under a milk crate set outside the store for the milkman to pick up before dawn and before the store opened.

"Did they ever catch her? The bag lady?" I asked.

"No. Like I said, she's dead," the little girl said.

"High living off the profits?" I joked. After all, this was joyless conversation, and she was only sixteen.

"No, she was murdered," the girl said. "Her old man hit her with a skillet."

That brought me to attention and explained where the big supplier had been keeping herself: in the county cemetery. I asked the girl how she knew all this, and she said she had watched several pickups and payoff drops. Besides, her twenty-three-year-old boyfriend was the local supplier to the kids.

I sat at the back table at Thelma's and made several passes through my brain's filing cabinet, searched the mental morgue of local murder stories through the two years at my present job, and thought about the probability that seventy-year-old Maude Walmsley, running a country store on the edge of a swamp, had been the primary distributor in the local drug scene. I finished the murder conviction story in longhand, called it into the office, and left.

It was late afternoon when I drove by the Walmsley store about ten miles east of town. It was a wood frame structure that needed painting. The roof had been extended to cover the gas pumps in front of the store. Beer and soda pop crates stacked near the closed and locked entrance once provided an informal seating arrangement for the more leisurely clientele, who had taken their business elsewhere since the murder. A couple of hundred feet behind the

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store, sitting under some trees, was the trailer where J.T. Walmsley had murdered his family. Just behind the store and in view of the trailer was a shed built over an oblong concrete structure. It looked as if it had been used to hold fish bait. There was what could have been a minnow pool and a square blocked off, likely for earthworms and night crawlers. All that seemed to be missing was a sign out front flashing "Maude's Pickup and Payoff."

I found Maude Walmsley's sister, with whom Maude had gone to live, at home about three miles from the store. It was one mile down the hard road in front of the store and two miles along a dirt road built over marshy ground and around knobby cypress trees. I carefully crossed a narrow bridge that passed over the creek feeding the nearby swamp. The sister, whose name was Naomi, lived alone now in a small cabin set on stilts to protect her from rising water. She seemed to have little else to do but sit and, I'd guess, conjure up, to her own satisfaction, a civilized way to execute her sister's murderer. It wasn't much of a life. Nor had Maude's been. Naomi said Maude never left the house after she closed the store and drove home. She never talked much about anything. Just lived simply, opening the store before dawn—Naomi reckoned, at my probe, about dawn, after the milkman, who had a key, left the milk and picked up the crates—and returning home before dark, never going anywhere.

"Nowhere? Ever?" I asked.

"When she had to," Naomi said, "Maude went to see a doctor in the city because old Doc Easley here didn't know anything and didn't care anyway."

"Any trouble paying her bills?" I asked. None, according to Naomi. I took the name of the doctor in the city and left.

I drove away, paying particular attention to the terrain over which Maude Walmsley would have driven—or walked—at night to return to the store and pick up the payoff from under the crates before the milkman arrived. Considering the dangerous things that could come out of the swamp, the isolation that would surround anyone disabled there at night, and the sheer distance the old lady would have had to travel in the middle of the night, I was left with two problems, one of which I had to find an answer for before I went back to my editor and told him that dead Maude Walmsley was the local dope queen: how to put the payoff into her hands. The second problem was not so easy: how to keep my editor from laughing when I told him the milkman must have done it. One fact was sure—somebody was getting to the crates before the milkman.

That evening I filed a sidebar on the Walmsley conviction while

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another section of me worked on the payoff problem. I didn't come up with anything except a funny mental picture of the brilliant little prosecutor when he found out he'd convicted an old man of murder without taking into account the fact, which he'd soon read about over his morning coffee, that one of the victims was a felon.

Next morning I went into the city to the main office to pick up my check, it being Friday. I used the opportunity to call on Maude Walmsley's doctor and learned that both Maude and J.T. used his services instead of old Doc Easley's. I asked him if he thought Maude could walk three miles. He said she couldn't. I asked him if she likely could maneuver a car on narrow roads and bridges at night. He said she lacked night vision and couldn't. In fact, he said, both of them had arthritis, and J.T. had bursitis so bad that neither got around very well. The doctor's words told me what I wanted to know. The reason I couldn't put the payoff in Maude Walmsley's hands was that Maude didn't get paid. The payee had to have been someone else. Like the grandson, Curtis James. He could have made the pickup in the middle of the night. It was an interesting circumstance—Maude delivering and Curtis James picking up. Grandmother and grandson. "Ma" Walmsley lives. She lived, that is, until her old man hit her in the head with a skillet.

I remembered very little about Curtis James from the trial other than an association he had with music. Both his high school music director and his church choir director had testified briefly about his character. Because Curtis James had left high school a year ago, it was the church choir director who had known him most recently; so I went back to the main office and placed a call to the Bethany Baptist Church. I could have read my trial notes and gotten the same thing the choir director told me over the phone. Curtis James, she said, was gifted with a beautiful tenor voice and exceptional musical talent, so much so that she taught him piano without fee to give him an instrumental skill and, selfishly, to keep him near the church choir. His great ambitions, she said, were to learn to play every instrument and own one of every kind. He loved music that much. He had wanted to teach music to others after he had completed a formal music education. That was never to be, she said, because Curtis James Walmsley was the victim of his family's poverty, ignorance, and just plain sorriness. I called the school music director to get his version and found Curtis James checked out clean and bright and shiny. He even sang at weddings and funerals the church director hadn't told me about.

Before I left the main office I went into the paper's morgue and looked for whatever had been filed, indexed, or photographed about

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Curtis James. There was a front-page photo of J.T. being led away from the emergency room of the hospital where he had been taken by the deputies who had arrested him. I could see a bandage around his left hand. There was no photo of Curtis James showing in an issue, but there were a couple of unpublished blowups of the three of them filed along with the negatives and contact prints. Two pictures had been taken inside the trailer before the bodies were carried away. One was of Maude crumpled in the corner formed by the trailer's stove and kitchen wall, the caved-in left front of her head and her blood-laden face and dress photographed with professional skill and clarity. It was a tasteless and offensive photograph, intruding upon the privacy of even a dead woman. A second blowup showed Curtis James where he fell, in a pose of the dead found commonly in newspaper and police photo labs everywhere. The .38 slug had hit him front and center, straight in and just a fraction below the sternum. The slug's impact had lifted him enough to make him top-heavy when he fell. A barely perceptible momentum in his body had carried his arms upward as he hit the floor. His hands lay resting across his chest, the right thumb of the musician and piano apprentice inexplicably angled crazily, mouth gaped askew, eyes opened in the bland gaze of the dead. I'd seen the pose a thousand times; but I could not see Curtis James Walmsley. He escaped me because he chose no friends, he associated with no one. He was devoted to his talent and ambitions; a dedicated musician, now deceased. He had also been a major local distributor of drugs—he and his grandmother. Right? I was beginning to feel discouraged.

Then I found a shadow on his halo. I didn't find it in the photo lab, but on the telephone after I called the Walmsleys' city doctor again to see if he had ever had reason to treat Curtis James. He hadn't. He'd never seen the boy. On a chance, I asked if he remembered anything about Maude he hadn't told me before. No, he said, just the usual problems of old age, like he said before; arthritis and such. Oh, he said, and speaking of arthritis, he remembered the old man coming in about seven or eight months ago with a bruise on his upper arm. The right arm, it was, he said. The bruise was almost black. The grandson, Curtis James, had hit the old man on the shoulder, apparently hard, and, said the doctor, you don't hit old people without hurting them and causing complications, in J.T.'s case severe bursitis. He could barely raise his hand to scratch his belly. There it was—an imperfection about Curtis James Walmsley. It was a smudge on his raiment, and it gave me little more than hope.

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I returned to Thelma's back table and ceiling fans. She brought me a beer and sat down across from me. Thelma had this way of listening to you until you'd finished and then saying something intelligent. I talked about Maude and Curtis James Walmsley.

"It's your priorities that bother me, Whit," she said, when I had finished telling her the story. "You're spending so much time and energy on the drug problem. Maude and Curtis James are dead. What difference does it make whether you find out tomorrow or two years from now what they did and how they did it? What's important is poor old J.T."

Poor old J.T.? I wondered earnestly.

"He's been convicted for a murder he couldn't have done. Shouldn't that be getting most of your attention?" she asked me. "They're going to sentence him next week."

"Of course," I responded weakly, my instincts trying to prevent my letting on that I didn't have even a fog of an idea what she was talking about. But I had to ask.

"Ah . . . how could J.T. not have done it? You know, committed one of the murders?"

"The doctor said he had bursitis so bad he couldn't raise his hand to scratch his belly. How could he have raised a skillet to hit his wife?"

I sat staring at Thelma for a while. How long, I don't know—seconds, I hope. During that time I tried to answer her question: with the other arm, the left arm, the arm that Curtis James didn't hit and that didn't have bursitis. But I remembered the photograph showing the crushed left side of Maude's forehead. She was hit with a skillet held in the right hand of whoever hit her; and J.T. Walmsley, the main character in my story this morning about yesterday's trial and conviction, couldn't have hit her. J.T. Walmsley was convicted of a crime he didn't commit.

"Curtis James," I said finally. "Curtis James must have killed his grandmother." Why? There were all kinds of reasons possible: he wanted a larger cut of the payoff; she was holding out on him; she wanted out, and so on. So he killed her.

"Okay, Thelma, that means the truth of what happened inside that trailer didn't come out in the trial. J.T.'s defense attorney didn't find out, and neither did the prosecution and all its investigative machinery. How do you think I'm going to find out?"

"Ask J.T.," she said. "He was there, remember."

"But what would he tell me that he wouldn't tell his own attorney?"

The answer came to me in the second before she answered.

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"Whom he's protecting," she said.

"Right."

I left Thelma and drove directly to the county jail where J.T. Walmsley was being held over for sentencing. Thelma had listened to my plan, listened as she usually did, and then said something intelligent, as usual: "Do it before they sentence him, Whit. The poor old man has suffered enough."

I was having a little trouble thinking of J.T. Walmsley as a poor old man, but I was having no trouble with the idea of undoing something gone wrong in the duly processed judgment against him.

The plan was simple. I would tell J.T. my theory that his wife and his grandson were the local suppliers before they died and watch his reaction. What else was there to do?

I was let in to J.T. Walmsley's cell with no problem—J.T. had caused no trouble, behaving throughout as he had at the trial, silently, without movement—and I found him sitting on the side of his bunk, staring, withdrawn, his hands unoccupied. He didn't look like a mean-tempered old man.

"Mr. Walmsley," I said, "I'm Whitney Collins. I'm a reporter for *The Advocate*. I cover Bethany for the eastern region edition."

J.T. remained seated. The deputy who had led me to him remained in the cell where there was nothing to sit on, almost everything with which J.T. could conceivably have harmed himself having been removed.

So much for introductions.

"Mr. Walmsley, I'm here to ask you to clarify for me a couple of questions I have about the drug distribution business your wife and grandson were operating out of your store."

The old man's head turned to look at me. It was the first time I had seen him look at anything other than something unnamed in space. I looked into his eyes and saw what no one else had seen because he wouldn't let them, eyes that had witnessed the devastation of everything he had valued. I thought he was going to cry, but I saw that his was the face of a man who had done all his crying. There was nothing left to cry out. I wanted to take my question back and tell him I would never bother him again for its answer; but I had to know, had to right the wrong I knew, now, had been done against him.

"I have a witness, Mr. Walmsley, who says your wife made the delivery in a sack of night crawlers inside the store. What I can't figure is the payoff. How'd she do it?"

My distaste for this particular aspect of the job wasn't being relieved by the paradox of wanting to get him out of that cell, yet

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wanting to leave him alone and let him end his tragedy as he wished.

"No . . . no, that ain't right," he said, his voice innocuous, unintimidating. "I saw 'em, those men, when they'd bring that stuff up to the dock back behind the trailer. They brought it in a boat through the swamp. He'd be awaitin' for 'em."

"Curtis James, you mean," I said gently.

"Yes. My little Curtis. He'd take the bags and hide 'em. He didn't know I saw him. But I did. Saw him put the stuff into other tiny bags. Then sometimes he'd put a little one into the bottom of a grocery sack under the bait bag. He'd hand it to Maude when she came out back. She'd take it in the store. She didn't know, mister," he said, and his secret was ended. While he himself was willing to age in jail wrongfully convicted as a murderer, he was not willing to let his wife be wrongfully remembered as a dope peddler. He had been protecting Curtis James; I had forced him to abandon his grandson in order to protect Maude.

"So, she found out about it that day and went back to the trailer and confronted him with it," I said, "and he killed her."

"Yes, sir."

I looked at him and wondered how this man could kill anybody, even in anger. Then I thought of Curtis James, whom J.T. had killed, in the only way I knew him, from the picture of him in the photo lab, dead, the thumb oddly angled, and knew that J.T. Walmsley had not killed in anger, but in self defense.

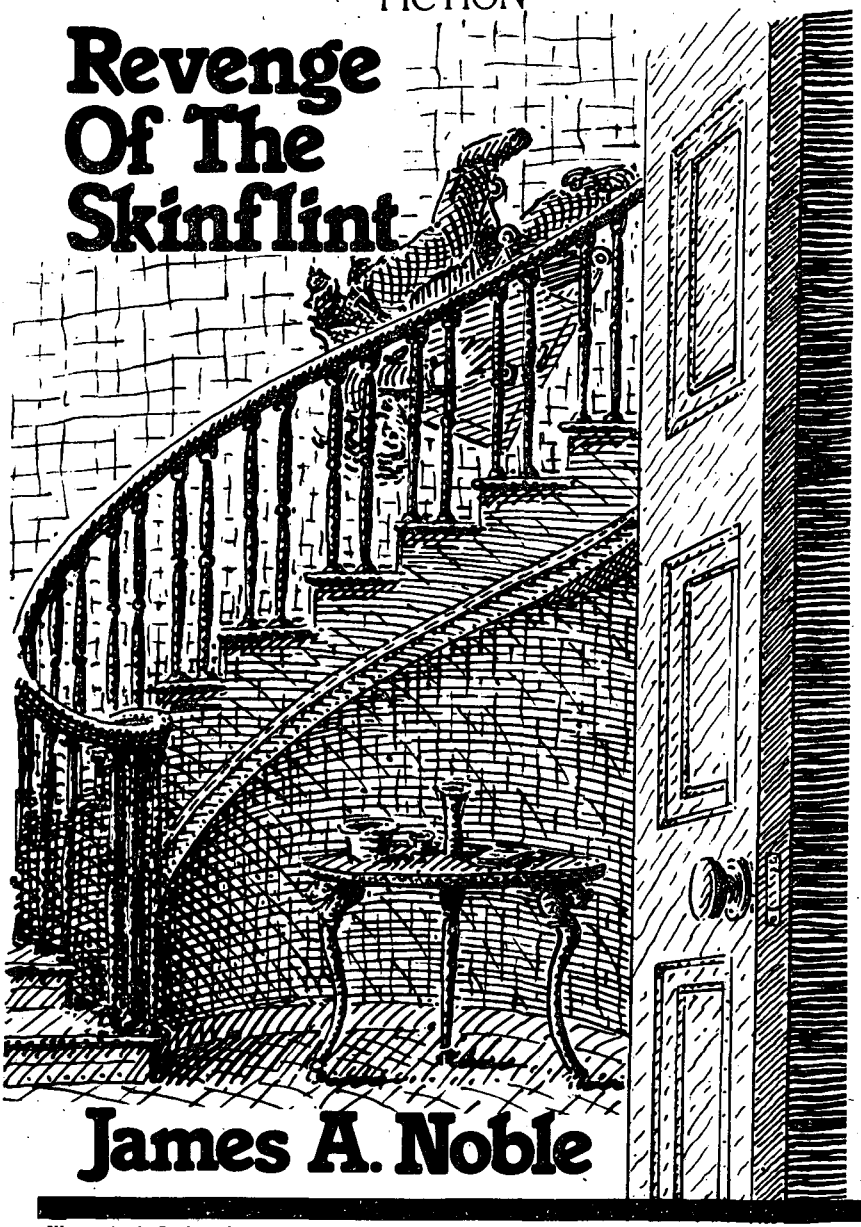
"Then Curtis James picked up the .38 you kept somewhere in the kitchen and turned it on you. You grabbed the gun and he pulled the trigger. The gun didn't fire when the hammer released and gouged the skin at the base of your thumb. If you deny it, Mr. Walmsley, there's a photograph of you coming out of the emergency room that day with your hand bandaged." He didn't speak. "Then you broke his thumb. You had to break it to take the gun away from him, and you shot him."

J.T. Walmsley never spoke in my presence again. I got up and left to write an altogether new version of what happened inside that trailer a half year ago. Soon, J.T. Walmsley would be leaving that cell, too, a man free to live out his life as he wished. Free to go back to all that he had, his trailer, and forever think about what happened there. Free to sit inside that trailer and to remember all the people in his life who had failed him; and free to make all the plans a lonely seventy-three-year-old man can make. I don't believe I had done J.T. Walmsley any favor.

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FICTION

Revenge Of The Skinflint



James A. Noble

Illustration by Bachrun Lomele

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When Ebenezer Crowsnitch, well-known penny pincher and cheapskate, left his old mansion for the first time in five years in response to a letter he had received indicating that one of his nephews had passed away, leaving him a small fortune, Wally "The Artful Dodger" Widget, professional cat burglar and safe-cracker, was prepared to make his move. You see, Wally had had one of his out-of-state cronies send the bogus letter to entice the old man away from his home.

Nearly everyone knew Crowsnitch was rich and hated banks. To Wally, that added up to one thing: the money was in the dilapidated mansion.

When he was certain the old miser had left, he drove up the long driveway and parked in front of the place. He knew he had nothing to fear. Crowsnitch lived alone, refusing to pay for any servants or a guard. In fact, he wouldn't even foot the expense of feeding a watchdog.

One good kick at the front door and the rusty old lock broke easily. Wally made a quick tour of the sparsely furnished downstairs, and finding nothing immediately that might have been a hiding place for money, he mounted the creaky staircase to check out the upstairs. After looking in several empty rooms, he found what he was seeking. There, in what was apparently Crowsnitch's bedroom, was a small portable safe the old man was using as a nightstand.

Within minutes, Wally had set up his electric drill and was punching holes at strategic points around the combination dial. When he was confident that he had rendered the locking mechanism inoperative, he pulled the handle down to open the door and tugged. It did not budge.

Wally was certain he had done the job correctly. The handle had turned, but the door wouldn't open. No big deal, thought Wally. He would just shove the safe down the stairs, put it in his car, and take it home where he could work on it at his leisure.

The safe weighed a good two hundred pounds, but because it was on casters, it rolled easily away from the wall. That was when Wally spotted the five inch hole in the back of it. Now he understood. Apparently the safe had not been opened for some time, so rather than pay to have it fixed, Crowsnitch had had a hole cut in the back. Any other robber might not have moved it and noticed the hole . . . but Wally had.

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He stuck his right arm in the hole and felt around. He could feel bundles of money bound with rubber bands, but when he attempted to pull one out, something happened.

There was a sharp click and something grabbed his arm through the sleeve of his leather jacket. He tried to yank his arm out, but whatever held it was larger than the hole and wouldn't come through. Wally sat down on the floor to think this one out.

The hole was too small for him to get his other hand in, and it would take too long to cut a larger hole with the drill. The only thing he could think of was to try to take the safe out to the car with his arm stuck in it. At home, he had the power saws to cut himself free.

Setting the drill on top of the safe, he pushed it easily out of the bedroom and down the hall. Now he was faced with the problem of the stairs.

He tossed the drill over the rail and preceded the safe down the stairs, bracing his shoulder against it to prevent it from moving too fast. But as soon as two of the casters cleared the lip of the first step, they fell out and the safe slipped off his shoulder. Inertia took over and the safe began the first of its many tumbles. Wally gasped as the safe delivered the initial overhead toss. Locked together, the two then proceeded to swap positions from top to bottom as they bumped down the steps. Wally knew instantly he preferred the top position.

Halfway down the staircase, the safe decided to take a detour and crashed through the railing to the floor below. Despite his protests, Wally went along.

He lay on the floor for several minutes with his two-hundred-pound bracelet still firmly attached. Battered, but unbroken, he staggered to his knees to survey his predicament.

As his head cleared, he realized that the door to the safe had popped open and its contents had spilled out onto the floor. What he had thought were bundles of money turned out to be newspaper cut to the same size as dollar bills. Wally mumbled a few choice words about Crowsnitch's genealogy through a bloody lip.

Despite assuming various contorted positions, he could neither see nor feel the device that had his right arm in such a firm grasp. Then he spotted a mirror sitting on the mantel of a large fireplace.

His body aching, he pushed the safe toward the fireplace. The task was made considerably harder by the loss of all the casters

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on the safe. On the way, he retrieved the drill. He paused to catch his breath.

Anchored firmly to the floor by the safe, he was just able to knock the mirror from its perch by using the drill to extend his reach. He nearly cried when in doing so he exposed a hole in the chimney. There, in neat little stacks, was Crowsnitch's money. Naturally, he couldn't reach it.

He picked up the mirror and held it in front of the open safe door. Inside was a bear trap. Only his thick leather jacket had prevented any damage to his arm. Again, more descriptive adjectives for Crowsnitch.

Every muscle and joint ached, and his body was bruised and beaten; his clothes were tattered remnants. Time was running out. Crowsnitch would soon discover he had been duped by the phony letter and might well be hurrying home at this moment. It seemed to Wally he had only one alternative. He must leave the money and get the safe into the passenger side of the car, drive home with one hand, and remove the accursed anchor.

The trip from the living room to the car was a long and arduous one. Wally pushed, pulled, and shoved the safe out of the living room, onto the porch, and down the steps (where it gave him two more good body slams).

When he arrived at the car, he tilted the safe on one edge and wedged himself under it. Mustering strength that only the desire to escape could give him, he shoved the safe up onto the front seat on the passenger side. Next, he wiggled his body between the top of the safe and the ceiling of the car until he was able to reach the driver's seat. Unfortunately, he ended up with his nose on the gas pedal and his feet stuck in the air. It took him nearly half an hour before he was able to flip himself around into a normal driving position. Then he realized he had left the other door open. He could hardly drive down busy streets with the door open without attracting attention.

He started the car and attempted to shut the door with quick bursts of acceleration. The door swung a little but would not close. Finally he spotted a tree along the driveway and decided to sideswipe it to force the door shut; however, he misjudged his speed and tore the door completely off its hinges. It landed in the driveway.

Frustrated, Wally laid his head on the steering wheel and

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pounded the dashboard with his fist. Now, instead of driving through town with the door open, he would be driving through with it missing. He knew he couldn't leave the thing lying there. The police would be able to determine the make, model, year, and color of his car if he did. It would have to be picked up.

Carefully he maneuvered the car until the wayward door was next to the open driver's door. Stretching as far as the safe would allow, he hoisted it into the rear seat. At last, he could leave this awful place.

He drove out onto the highway and had barely gone a mile when he passed a patrol car sitting on a side street. Wally glanced in the rear view mirror. They had spotted the missing door and were coming after him. He slammed the accelerator to the floor and the car leaped forward.

For a few minutes, Wally thought he was going to elude his pursuers; then he made the mistake of making a sharp left-hand turn onto a cross street.

The safe wanted no part of this wild ride and started to "exit right," straight through the opening left by the missing door. Wally resisted and put a death grip on the steering wheel. The car negotiated a perfect left-hand turn while the driver, the safe, and the separated steering wheel continued straight ahead without means of conveyance.

Wally spent two months in intensive care at the local hospital, but he never served any time for his attempted robbery. He was put on probation when extensive psychological testing proved he had become a miraculously reformed man. Only the name "Crowsnitch" sent him into uncontrollable fits of shaking and sobbing.

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FICTION

LOG JAM

By Ingram Meyer

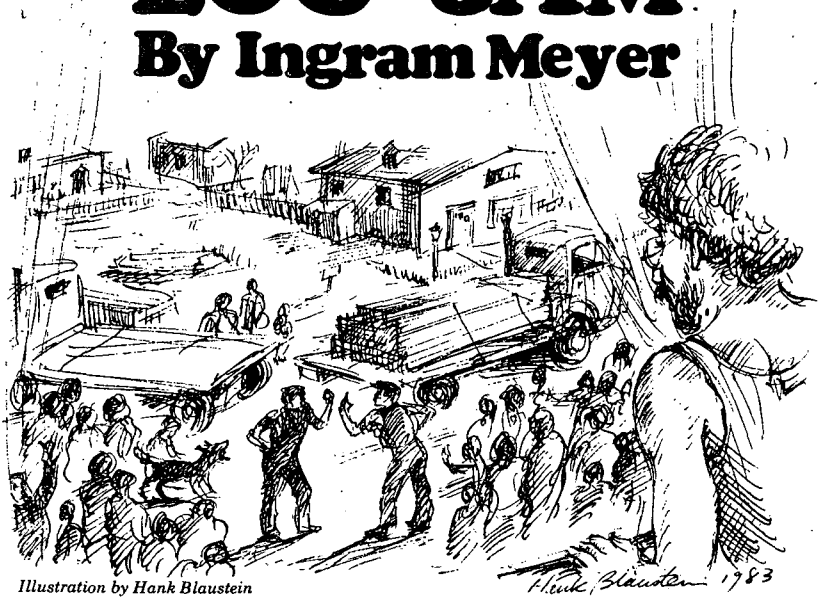


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

The telephone rang sharply. Pixy opened one eye, reached for the noisy instrument.

"Damn!" he croaked, still half asleep, remembering he hadn't brought it in from the hallway last night.

He tried to disentangle himself from the sheet and blanket, then slid to the floor, covers and all. The telephone kept on ringing shrilly, and Pixy kicked the half open bedroom door and stumbled out into the hall.

"Yeah—hello!" he growled.

"I can hear you haven't had your morning coffee yet!" came a cheerful voice over the line.

"Gee, Gran, it's only—"

"—seven thirty." Grandma sounded especially happy this morning. "Look out your front window." And she hung up without further comment. Did she know about last night? She probably did, for didn't she know *everything* he did?

"I'm going to move away from here," growled Pixy. "'Way over to the other side of town.

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To Canada! On top of Mount Everest!"

He had been, till the early hours, at his new girlfriend Tiffy's house down by the corner, celebrating her dad's retirement. And celebrated they had, drinking the old geezer's different kinds of booze. Awful stuff! At the end he, and also Tiffy's pa, had had a few too many, and she had got mad and gone off to bed. Pixy felt pretty bad about it this morning, and his head hurt like hell. He hoped old Bogman felt just as rotten. Would serve that so-and-so right. Giving himself a party, for cripes sake!

A cat brushed affectionately against his bare leg. Grandma's fat tiger-striped tabby, of course! Pixy yawned.

"This house is definitely going on the market," he told it. "I will not live next door to *her* much longer!" The cat purred loudly, not at the grumpy young man, but at another cat, a large calico, which had just come around the kitchen door.

"How the hell *did* you two get inside *my* house anyhow?" yelled Pixy. But the calico only arched its back contentedly, and the tabby started to wash its face.

"I'll call the A.S.P.C.A. to come and get you!" But of course Grandma's cats knew it was just an idle threat, for their beloved owner would strangle her neighbor, who was also her business partner, with her bare hands should he so much as lay a finger on either Fluffy or Louise. She and this young man might be partners in their inquiry business, and she might treat him like a son, but her darling pets would always come first.

Suddenly Pixy remembered, fuzzily, something about an open front room window last night. He rushed into the room, half expecting the room to be in shambles, burglarized. But all was in order, except for the spiky potted plant that he'd gotten from *her* next door. It lay on the floor, the soil spilled out and the plant broken into pieces. Pixy grinned nastily.

"Thanks," he said to the cats. "Now I can throw that ugly ol' thing out with a clear conscience." Then he looked out, looked up and down the road, and forgot to close his mouth. He lived in a fairly new neighborhood, with small, cosy bungalows and a couple of ranchstyle houses. And out there, in the middle of the pleasant block, were two—

Pixy didn't believe what he saw. It was too stupid. He turned around and marched into the kitchen. He went to the cupboard, took out a cup—the glasses were still somewhere among the dirty dishes in the sink—went to the refrigerator, and poured himself some milk.

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He took a swallow, put the cup on the table, then went slowly back into the front room and to the window. Yup, the things, *two* of them, were really there. Blocking the road, back to back, were two diesel tractor units, each with a flatbed behind it, one still with its high stack of lumber, the other already partly unloaded. Pixy rubbed his eyes. It was too silly. Right across from his house, on the only empty lot in the block, were two very angry men in work clothes. They were shaking their fists at each other, and they looked as if they were ready for a heck of a fight. Out on the road stood the entire neighborhood, most of the children still in their pajamas. Excited little dogs ran back and forth, barking happily. A tall man in a fireman's uniform—Hal Ryan, Pixy's next door neighbor to the left—waved and called cheerfully, "Looks like the circus has come to town!" He walked across Pixy's lawn and up to the window. "There's been a hell of a mixup. Seems that one of the truck drivers has got the wrong address. But they both deny it."

By now the first flatbed was almost empty, and two men near the second one had started undoing the chains that held the high stack of lumber in place. Above the confusion the driver of the first truck could be heard crying, "—my order! Mr. Rathmore will be here any minute now with *my* certified check! He said he'd be here around seven."

"Correction!" yelled the second driver. "The man will be here at a quarter to eight with *my* check!" He motioned to his men to start unloading. "Mr. Rathmore ordered a load of lumber from *us,* and a load of lumber from us he'll get."

The tall fireman below Pixy's front window said, "Gee, Pix, I wonder about the size of that new house. There certainly is lumber galore. Might put the rest of our places to shame."

From the house to the right of Pixy's, Grandma came through a gap in the honeysuckle hedge. She was loudly calling, "Yoo-hoo, yoo-hoo!"

The two cats inside Pixy's house heard their mistress all right, but they kept on lapping up the last of the milk from the toppled-over cup on the kitchen table. Then they rushed through the hallway, across the living room, past Pixy, and out the still-open window.

"Oh, there you are, my little darlings. Did you have a nice visit with—"

Pixy was disgusted and quickly closed the window.

The detectives' side of the block luckily had a back yard lane, so Grandma and Pixy were able to get

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away from all the turmoil out in front. They arrived at nine at their office. Sophie Carlton, their secretary and Grandma's old schoolfriend, had already made the coffee, and she was buttering homemade blueberry muffins on a sideboard for the three of them. Instantly Pixy cheered up.

"Gran, is that wonderful —and, oh so beautiful —secretary for real?" He gave Sophie a big hug, then poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Now, now, Pixy," scolded Grandma mockingly. "Don't praise her too much. She might just turn modern on us and refuse to do the little things secretaries used to do when she and I were young. Or, worse, she might ask for a raise."

The detectives took their coffee mugs and muffins to the private office they shared, while Sophie Carlton started to clack away on her typewriter.

About two hours later Sophie stuck her head around the door.

"What is it, Sophie?" asked Grandma, looking up from a reference book. The secretary came all the way in, closing the door behind her.

"There's a man out there. He wants to know if he can see you without an appointment."

"Why'd you ask? You know an appointment isn't necessary with us. Business isn't *that* great," said Pixy.

"Yeah, I know. But this man, his name is Johnny Lancaster, he's kind of—well, strange. Not quite right up here, perhaps." Sophie tapped her forehead.

Grandma and Pixy both got up from behind their desks and followed their secretary to the other office.

The man, who rose from the chair upon their entering, was not much taller than Pixy, but his arms were muscular, with a large tattoo of an eagle and some sort of emblem showing below his rolled up shirtsleeves. His hair was short and sprinkled with grey, and his bushy mustache hung right over his mouth. There was a nervous twitch to his left eye. He shook Pixy's extended hand, nodded at Grandma. Then he cleared his throat.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Johnny Lancaster from Lancaster Lumber Sales. Don't know if you remember me, but I'm one of the guys who had a load of lumber stuck in the middle of your street. I'm the one who came in off Finch Street. Anyhow, after all the hassle with the police and the funny reporters, and with my loudmouthed, crafty rival, I thought I'd hire a private detective to help me find a certain party."

"Let me guess," said Pixy. "Somebody got both your lumber company and the other one to deliver housebuilding mate-

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rial to the same site. Right?"

"Yeah, right. To a property on which some contractor is supposed to build a brand-new ranchstyle house, starting next week. The foundation is already there. By the way, I own the lumber company. It's only a smallish one, but I can tell you one thing: it'll be famous by tonight. It'll be the joke of the day. The media is in on it, of course. Came to Starbird Street with cameras and the works. Damn, damn!" He made his hands into fists and moaned. "The worst of it is, I'm getting married on Saturday, and I sure as hell don't want my fiancée to call it off. She's not the one who would marry a fool! So, please, try to find that weird old man who ordered the building material from two different companies. The person who, I found out, doesn't even *own* the building site." Johnny Lancaster took a stick of gum out of its wrapper and popped it into his mouth.

"A heck of a time to have given up smoking! My fiancée's request. But now I'm halfway tempted to—"

"Don't be!" warned Grandma. "Cigarettes won't solve this thing. See how nervous you are? You don't want lung cancer on top of it, do you? You don't want your lady to become a widow shortly. Inherit all your possessions—remarry and—" Grandma's imagination was running wild, and Pixy blushed with embarrassment.

Johnny Lancaster shook his head. "Please, lady, you sound just like my mother! I came here to hire someone to help me out of a mess, not to get preached to. Help me find the joker who's making a fool, a laughingstock, out of me." He chewed viciously on his gum for a while.

Pixy asked, "Can't you find him yourself? Isn't he listed in the telephone book? In fact, didn't you get his address when you wrote out the order form?"

"Well, of course I did. I phoned there before I came here, but—you won't believe this—I was told that the man whose address I had gotten, Andrew Rathmore, has been *dead for over two years!*"

"What?" cried Grandma and Pixy, and also Sophie Carlton, who had left open the door to the outer office.

Johnny Lancaster leaned back in his chair. "Let me explain," he said, rubbing his eyes. He looked very tired, and the others felt a little sorry for him.

"Last week, Tuesday, an older man who called himself Andrew Rathmore came to my office, asking for an estimate for material to build his new house. He told me how soon, and where, it was to be delivered. Told me, he wanted the best wood available. Nasty touch, that was.

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Well, anyhow, at first we agreed that I'd call him back the following day with my estimate for the twenty-six hundred square foot house, as—of course—I had to have a look at the house plan first, and at the location. Some of the new building sites are hard to get at, you know.

"Rathmore, or whoever he was, agreed. He gave me a copy of the blueprint for the new house, or should I say *a* new house, and he also gave me a telephone number. And, I must admit, I was quite desperate for the order. Business isn't what it used to be in the lumber industry."

Johnny Lancaster crossed his legs, then went on. "Then the old man told me that, frankly, he had also already contacted another lumber place and asked for an estimate, and that the lowest bidder would get the order. So—" Johnny Lancaster sighed deeply "—I came right out and asked how high that other one was. Old Andrew Rathmore—or whoever—hemmed and hawed, then reluctantly told me the sum. It didn't sound like a bad price, and I needed the order, so I told him I'd deliver for ten percent less, and—well, I got the order right then and there. I figured out the approximate amount of lumber from his house plan; that took quite some time, too. We agreed on a date for delivery, which was early this morning. And that was that. He said he'd be at his new property on Starbird Street and would pay me by certified check upon delivery. And, of course, stupid me, so darned desperate for business these days, nervous about the wedding and all as well, believed him. Maybe I should have smelled a rat. I mean, it was quite a large sum. Thousands. But, as I've said before, the man wasn't young any more, and they sometimes get a little funny in the head. I convinced myself that there was no reason to question the transaction. And now—" Johnny Lancaster put his tired head in his hands, moaning. "And now it's turned out to be a real mess."

"The old guy gave you the phone number of someone who died two years ago?" asked Pixy.

"Yeah. This morning, in the telephone booth from where I tried to call him, I double-checked the number and address. It was all still the same, but it's listed under the name 'M. Rathmore' now. That turned out to be his widow."

Grandma asked, "What about the other lumber company? They must have gone through the same thing. And what about your order form?"

Johnny Lancaster shrugged his shoulders. "The order form

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is signed 'Andrew Rathmore,' but that guy is *dead*. For *two years*."

Pixy had made notes throughout their client's account of the hoax, but he said nothing. He couldn't think of anything to ask.

Lancaster went on, telling the detectives about how he and his employees had spent all of yesterday afternoon loading the flatbed truck with lumber. How he and one of his men had, early this morning, at a time when the traffic was still sparse, driven the lumber down the quiet roads, with himself, Johnny Lancaster, at the wheel. They had been in a terrific mood, had laughed and joked all the way to Starbird Street.

"But aren't you ever more curious about your customers?" asked Grandma. "Really check them out or something? Sounds to me you left yourself quite open for—"

"Oh, sure. But this time I only looked the customer up in the telephone book, an old one down in a shed in my workyard, unfortunately. And in it the name and address checked out okay. 'Andrew Rathmore' was there. So I had a nasty surprise this morning with the newer phone book. And then talking to Rathmore's widow! It was awful, to say the least. The poor woman started crying." He was near tears himself.

Just then Sophie Carlton came in with a steaming cup of coffee and a buttered blueberry muffin. "This will pick you up, you poor thing," she said. "And here's a Kleenex for your gum."

Johnny Lancaster looked up, perplexed. Pixy grinned.

The lumber company owner took the coffee and muffin gratefully, then went on.

"Can you imagine, asking for a long-dead person? It gave me the creeps, it did. And it sure gave the old lady quite a turn when I asked for her deceased husband."

"Where is your company located?" Grandma asked.

"Our lumberyard is down on Corbin Drive. You know, near the harbor."

"Oh yes. It's quite a way from Starbird Street."

"That's right. Anyway, Rathmore—or whoever the guy was—told me the Parks and Recreation people had bought up his old property for a new community swimming pool, and he needed to get another house in a hurry. And as he said he owned three acres, it all sounded very convincing to me. Oh boy, that hoaxer was thorough, I must say that for the creep."

When their client left, Grandma and Pixy began trying to work out an approach to the case, a very puzzling one.

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Make out a schedule, find out where to get information on the Starbird Street building site, investigate the victimized lumberyard people, and even do a little research into the deceased Andrew Rathmore's past. Somewhere there must have been a motive for the prank.

Grandma said, "First we ought to—"

Sophie Carlton tapped on the door, then stuck her head in.

"Guess who's here?" she said.

The detectives just looked at her, saying nothing. Sophie Carlton had been a stage actress in her younger years, had played many roles as maids, nurses, and secretaries. Now, having been hired as real life office help by the Smith and Pixley Inquiry Agency, she could not shed the theatrical image she had created for herself all those years ago. Asking her patient employers to guess who was waiting in the other office was merely for dramatic effect, was part of her personality. Grandma and Pixy waited the appropriate thirty seconds; then Pixy said, "We give up. Who's waiting?"

"The *other* truck driver, that's who!"

The man who entered their office was, at least in looks, the complete opposite of Johnny Lancaster. This one was a tall, willowy redhead. He was probably the same age as the other, but his face was smooth and clean-shaven. He said, "Hi!," then introduced himself as Kiel Atwell. His story matched almost exactly that of their other client, except that Kiel Atwell was quite cheerful about the whole thing. He also owned, or part-owned, a small lumber firm. But this client didn't have a fussy fiancée from whom he was expecting trouble for having been made a public fool. No, this one had a rich grandpa who held the pursestrings, so to speak.

"Can't have the sweet Santa Claus backing out of the lumber business, can we?" Kiel Atwell grinned. "Can't have his old backgammon buddies down at the Home tease him for having a guy like me in his family. Grandpa hates publicity of any kind. That's the reason I can't lay charges for mischief. So I'd like Rathmore found by you, and then I'll deal with him myself."

Grandma and Sophie Carlton looked worried, but Pixy just shook his head.

"Old Andy has been dead for over two years."

"Uh-uh," said Kiel Atwell. "My Andy, the guy who came to my office and ordered a load of lumber, might have been on his last leg, but he sure as hell wasn't dead."

Grandma asked, "And where

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is your lumberyard located?"

"It's fairly close to your street. Just at the end of a short little cul-de-sac down by the freeway." The detectives knew the place. It was only six or so blocks from Starbird Street.

"By the way," said Kiel Atwell, "I got your name and address from someone I know slightly on your block. A fireman."

The detectives said nothing. They didn't think that either of their new clients knew about his rival's having come to the same inquiry agency. So they kept quiet. Kiel Atwell went on.

"I feel rather dumb, being taken in by that old geezer, but he sounded so—so genuine in my office, if you know what I mean. Told me he needed a new house because the city of Bellingham had bought up his old one for the property because they wanted to build a new community center, with swimming pool and all."

"Did you try to contact your customer before coming here today?" asked Pixy.

"Sure I did! Right after getting my truck back to my lumberyard, I took my Gia Mustang and drove out to the address I'd been given. And—hear this! —the address was only a public playground. It wasn't even all that new. I asked a young mother with a kid who was mucking around in a sandbox if she knew anything about a Rathmore family, and she said that they had moved away a couple of years ago when the park was put in. So it wasn't any good for me to look around further in that neighborhood."

"But you had a telephone number. Didn't you try it?" asked Grandma.

"No, I figured the number had gone with the house."

"Probably not. Most people take their phone numbers along when they move—unless it's to another town, of course."

"Oh. Yeah, one can take along one's number, of course." Kiel Atwell grinned again. "I must tell you, I was so bloody mad this morning, I'm afraid I just didn't think clearly."

They all looked at each other for a few seconds, then Grandma got up from her chair. She took Pixy's notes, skimmed through them, found the Rathmore telephone number. "Now let's find out, once and for all, what's what," she said as she dialed.

"Oh, hello. Is this the Rathmore residence? No, no, I'm not a pesky salesperson, Mrs. Rathmore. Yes, I know. I too get those annoying calls all the time. Yes, it's true, it sure is. Having to rush to the phone all the time, and then it turns out to be—Yes, yes, I'm sorry your daughter is too busy at least to call her dear mother once a

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week. Yes, even once a month would do. I agree that only on holidays is not enough. Now, the reason I'm calling you —away from your favorite soap opera? Oh dear. Anyhow, I am really trying to find out about your husband . . . I'm the second person to ask for the deceased this morning?"

Kiel Atwell had gone, Sophie Carlton was typing a letter, and Grandma and Pixy were sitting behind their respective desks.

"Who could the person be, the one who called himself Andrew Rathmore?" asked Pixy. "And what did that person try to accomplish by ordering two rival firms to deliver building material to the same place? Who *is* the man?"

"It's definitely not a harmless teenager prank," Grandma answered. "The person who ordered the lumber was an older man. A friendly, neat man whom both Johnny Lancaster and Kiel Atwell believed to be Andrew Rathmore. So the motive behind the nasty business must be deeper than a couple of kids having a little fun."

"Yeah, that's for sure, Gran." Pixy stretched his arms, yawned.

"Shouldn't keep those late nights!" sniffed Grandma.

"*Of course* you know about that." Pixy was annoyed. He yawned again. "I wish you would keep out of my private life."

"What private life? Listen, Pixy, the whole neighborhood knows about your thing with that awf—"

Pixy threw her a warning glance.

"Okay, okay. Maybe Tiffy Bogman has changed. And I must admit, she's a pretty little thing."

Pixy was somewhat mollified, but Grandma went on.

"But there you were, walking arm in arm with old Bogman down the street—at three in the morning, singing your little hearts out. My cats sound better. Pixy, it was disgusting!"

"Huh?"

"Don't you remember? Hell, Pixy, you'd forgotten your house key, and your next door neighbor, Hal Ryan, somehow managed to open your front room window and hoist you in. You don't remember?"

Pixy cringed. No, he didn't remember a darned thing! The last thing seemed to have been Tiffy's pa opening another bottle. He sighed. Grandma sighed, too. The shame of it all! She would have to keep a tighter rein on the young man so he wouldn't go completely to the dogs.

By two thirty in the afternoon, Grandma and Pixy had finally agreed on a strategy. They grabbed

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their jackets and went to the outer office.

"Sophie, Gran and I have to go out now," Pixy said. "Have to work on the new case."

"Yes," added Grandma. "No use waiting for us here at the office. Just go on home at your usual time."

Sophie Carlton looked worried. "It's getting late. Can't it wait till tomorrow morning?"

Pixy just grinned, and his partner said, "We do our sleuthing while the trail is still hot."

Their secretary still looked troubled. "I'm sure glad I'm not a private eye," she said. "This seems an awfully complicated case. Has too many different people in it."

"Complicated—yes. But it doesn't sound especially dangerous. Pixy and I will first find the owner of the building lot in our road. Then we'll try to find a connection between the owner and Lancaster and Atwell. Or the owner and the deceased Rathmore. Or all of them." Grandma took her purse from a shelf under the sideboard, and together the detectives left the office.

They went first to the Land Registry Office, where they found the name and address of the owner of the Starbird Street building site.

"Edward Reith," said Grandma, squeezing behind the wheel of their elderly Volkswagen. "Somehow that name sounds familiar, but I can't place it."

Pixy buckled up as he always did when it was his partner's turn to drive. Then he looked at his notes.

"Reith's residence is on Marquince Street. That's just off Alabama Street, as far as I can remember. Should be easy to find. It must be pretty close to Lake Whatcom."

And he was right. They kept on driving along Alabama, then turned right a couple of blocks from the lake. The 3600 block on Marquince Street was just a short dead end road, freshly paved. On one side stood half a dozen older houses, one of them a neat two story with dormer windows. Right across from it was the entrance to a fairly large lumberyard.

"Well, I'll be darned!" exclaimed Pixy. "If it ain't another damned—"

"Pipe down, Pixy, there are some people coming from the house."

A young woman dressed in what looked like a nurse's uniform got up on her toes and gave a tall, bald man with a Van Dyke beard a kiss on the cheek. She then jumped into a small red sports car and drove off. The man walked across the street and glanced in at Grandma's rolled-down window.

"Can I be of any help?" he

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asked in a pleasantly deep voice. "Are you lost?"

"If one of these houses belongs to an Edward Reith, then we aren't lost," smiled Grandma.

"In that case, let me introduce myself. I'm Edward— Ted — Reith."

The detectives climbed out of their little car. "You must be the owner of the building lot on Starbird Street," Pixy said.

"I sure did buy one there. But why did you come to see me?"

The detectives explained that they were going to become neighbors. They exclaimed over what a lovely, friendly neighborhood he had chosen. And finally they got around to an account of the two rival lumber companies having been victimized by some prankster.

Lumber? Building materials? *What* building materials and lumber? Ted Reith was having his own stuff sent over from his own lumberyard next Friday.

"I had better drive over to my property right away to have a look," he said. But Grandma and Pixy told him it was too late. The two trucks with their loads had already left.

Just then they saw a white panel truck with a news crew from one of the local television stations turn into Marquince Street. Grandma grabbed her young partner by the arm, and together they rushed to their Volkswagen. It was at times like these when their small, inconspicuous car came in especially handy.

"I'm sure glad we've had a new motor built into this thing," laughed Pixy as he smartly bypassed the panel truck, carefully avoiding the suspicious looks of the news people. "But no luck there, Gran," Pixy added as they drove back along Alabama Street. "Ted Reith seems to be in the clear."

"*Seems* to be. Then again, what possible reason could he have for ridiculing his own lumberyard?"

"Do we now visit old Mrs. Rathmore? Or should we drive back to the office and see her tomorrow morning?"

Grandma shrugged. "Might as well go now. Get it over with. She's one of those whiny people. You should have heard her on the phone. Complain, complain. And she didn't even know me!"

Pixy laughed. "I heard your end of the conversation, and that was enough. I must say, it was rather comical, in fact. Okay then, let's call on the little lady. She lives just a couple of blocks over, on Carolina Street. I have the number here in my notebook."

Mrs. Rathmore lived in a blue ranchstyle house with white trim. It lay well back from the street, a hedge all

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around its large lot. On either side of the entrance was a beautiful rockery. Grandma was impressed, but Pixy walked straight up the half dozen steps and rang the doorbell. Nothing happened. He pressed the bell button again, and at last they heard someone move, sort of bump against the door. It took another minute before the door opened. And then the detectives saw the reason for the delay, for the lady, a large heavy person, was in a wheelchair. And Grandma also understood why she had been so annoyed over the telephone calls that morning.

"Hello," Grandma said. "Are you the lady I spoke to over the telephone this morning? I'm from the Smith and Pixley Inquiry Agency. I am Smith, and this young gentleman with me is Mr. Pixley."

"I don't know what you want with me, but come in—and close the door behind you." With that Mrs. Rathmore whirled around and rolled through a wide doorway to the right.

Pixy took a straight-backed chair by the window, and Grandma sat down on a saggy love seat, putting her somewhat oversized leather purse by her feet.

"Tell us, Mrs. Rathmore," she said, "did your husband know a man by the name of Edward Reith?"

"You mean Ted Reith, the sawmill owner?" Mrs. Rathmore looked surprised. "Everybody knows that one. Ran for mayor once. Seemed a nice enough man, but lost. You must have seen him on TV, too."

The detectives looked at each other. That's where Grandma had heard Reith's name. But it must have been a long time ago.

"Did your husband know him personally?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so. At least, I can't remember." She thought for a while. "No, if Andy had known him personally, he'd have told me, I'm sure." The old lady glanced at a photograph in a silver frame on the mantelpiece. Grandma and Pixy looked at it, too. Andrew Rathmore had been a skinny, balding little man—if it was he in the photograph. Mrs. Rathmore wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "Not much to look at was my Andy, but he was a good man. Never had a bad thought in his head."

"Did he have any connection with the lumber business?" Pixy asked.

The old lady shook her head. "No, Andy was in shoes. We had our own little shoe store on Ellis Drive until he retired." She tried her best not to look at Grandma's frazzled sneakers, and Pixy was embarrassed, for his partner was wearing her ugly grey and blue canvas shoes

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again. One of them had a *hole* in it! How she could wear such footwear with her smart greenish tweed suit and her beautifully done silver hair was beyond him. So Pixy looked at the photo again and asked, "Did Mr. Rathmore ever mention a Johnny Lancaster or a Kiel Atwell?"

"No," said the old lady in the wheelchair. "No, I can't remember his ever mentioning either of those names. Who are they? In fact, why is everybody suddenly so interested in my poor Andy? He's gone to his reward, two years ago last March." She took a small, lacy handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. The detectives felt awful.

As they sat up, Grandma said, "Well, dear, don't you worry. It's nothing. There has been some sort of mixup with names, and we're just trying to sort it out. Oh my, Pixy, just look at all the beautiful plants in Mrs. Rathmore's yard!" She moved to the window in admiration, trying to cheer the old lady up. And it worked, for Mrs. Rathmore smiled.

"Yes, aren't the flowers lovely! I sit here most of the day and admire my garden. A dear old friend comes along once in a while and does wonderful things to the property."

It was starting to get dark when they turned into Starbird Street.

"I had better find out if Tiffy is still mad at me," said Pixy. "And see how her dad is feeling today."

"Is this an excuse for another night of boozing it up?" asked Grandma suspiciously, parking their Volkswagen in Pixy's driveway. Pixy had a nasty answer on his tongue, but he caught himself and waited till his partner had slid out from behind the wheel. He was still trying to remember the last part of the night before, but it was no use. His mind stayed blank. Should have listened to Grandma. Drink just wasn't his thing any more.

"Come along to my house, Pixy. I'll make us both a nice cup of hot chocolate and a grilled cheese on rye." She looked kindly at her young partner while holding aside the branches of the honeysuckle hedge that divided their front yards. Pixy remembered his sink full of dirty dishes, shrugged, and followed his neighbor. He was really quite fond of Grandma, but he couldn't very well let on after her remark about the boozing.

"I'll phone the Bogmans later on, Gran."

"You do that, Pixy."

They were sitting at the table in Grandma's large, cosy

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kitchen, watching the evening news on a small black and white portable television set on a little shelf.

"Sports and the weather report should come on next," Grandma said. "Thank goodness they didn't show anything about the lumber—oh, hell!"

On the small screen they saw Johnny Lancaster and Kiel Atwell standing opposite each other, gesticulating with their arms, heads bent forward like two roosters ready for a good fight.

Then the camera panned slowly over all the partially unloaded lumber. In the background the detectives recognized several of their neighbors.

"They didn't miss much, did they?" grumbled Grandma. Then she sat up straight and cried, "Oh Pixy, did you see that? Did you see my naughty Louise and Fluffy in the middle of the road? They aren't allowed to!"

So indignant was Grandma that she almost missed Ted Reith on the television screen and only caught the last of what he was saying.

"—from other sources when I have my own lumber company? Everybody in this area knows that in my firm we carry only superior quality building materials. So why would I—" The tall bald man was near tears.

Sophie Carlton was already busy making the coffee when the detectives arrived at the office the following morning.

"How's the case coming along?" she asked, opening a pint carton of half 'n half for their coffee.

"Nowhere so far," sighed Grandma. "I sure as hell hope we have more luck today."

Pixy said nothing. He was in a foul mood. Last night he'd fallen asleep in his favorite armchair. All he had really wanted to do was to think out how to excuse to Tiffy Bogman his disgusting behavior of the previous night. But it had been a long day, he had dozed off, and he hadn't waked up until it was too late to call. And then—he could kick himself!—he had overslept this morning. When he finally tried to phone the Bogman house, Grandma was already honking the horn outside to make him hurry up and get to work. And now it would be too late. Tiffy would have left for work, and he really didn't have anything to say to her father. So there was a whole long day ahead of him, not knowing whether she was still mad at him or not. Pixy plopped himself behind his desk.

Grandma came through the door from the outer office, carrying two steaming mugs of coffee and pushing the door shut

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behind her with her hip.

"This will wake you up," she said. Pixy reached for one of the mugs, took a big sip—and swore terribly. All he needed on top of everything else was a burned tongue.

"You stop that!" scolded his partner. "I've just about had it with your rotten temper this morning. We have a case to work on, you know. In fact, we have two in one. We have two clients—paying clients!—and you know we need the money badly. The rent is due next week."

Pixy felt sorry, but he wasn't going to let her know it. Maybe later. So he grabbed a pen and paper.

"We have to establish a connection among all the people in this investigation," he said. "So far there doesn't seem to be any. Johnny Lancaster and Kiel Atwell are the victims. Ted Reith owns the Starbird Street property, and he, too, has been made a fool of in a way. All three men own smallish lumberyards. That must be the link. But so far we can't prove it one way or the other." Pixy took, very carefully, a sip from the coffee mug. Then he went on.

"And Andrew Rathmore, the alleged culprit in this dumb case, is dead. So now we have to find the crazy impostor."

"At least this isn't a murder case or something horrible like that, Pixy. All we have to find is a prankster, although a rather ruthless one."

"And when we do find him, Gran, we had better hide him again, at least from Kiel Atwell. I have the feeling that one will gladly break a few of the mischief-maker's bones. He more or less said so. Well, and then we have Rathmore's widow, an elderly crippled lady, on our list of people in this case. And—"

"—and I have a funny feeling we didn't ask her the right questions."

"What right questions, Gran? Mrs. Rathmore didn't know any of the names we mentioned, except for Ted Reith. And him she didn't even know personally. Also, she's pretty sure her husband hadn't known any of the three people involved, either. And Ted Reith didn't even know about the prank until we told him."

"Maybe they lied."

"I don't think poor old Mrs. Rathmore would lie. No, she sounded quite straightforward. But maybe Reith didn't tell the truth. All that hullaballoo over his building site, and he hadn't heard about it?"

"Maybe the whole lot of them lied, Pixy. But why then hire us? Pay us money? No, we're missing something. Let me think." Grandma got up, took a half full little watering can

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from on top of the filing cabinet, and started to water her potted plants in the window.

"I really think we should ask some more questions of Mrs. Rathmore first. Ask her more about her husband. For example: did he have an old friend who was a little mentally unbalanced. *Someone* was impersonating Andrew Rathmore. And that someone must have known him pretty well. Some old friend—"

"—who comes once in a while to do 'wonderful things' to the widow's garden!" cried Pixy.

Grandma looked surprised. "You just might have something there, Pixy. Why the hell didn't either of us think of asking her the friend's name last night? Then again, it might be a lady friend. And we're not looking for a woman."

"I'll telephone to find out," said Pixy. "Or ought we to go to her in person?"

"Why don't you drive over to Mrs. Rathmore's by yourself this morning and ask for the friend's name? Me, I just couldn't go there again and—well—upset the old dear once more. If nothing comes of your little errand, we'll talk again with Ted Reith."

"Which reminds me, Gran. Remember the pretty young lady who pecked Reith on the cheek?"

"Of course I do. Why? Might have been his daughter. Maybe he has a younger wife. Could even be a tramp who knows all the men in this case. But being a woman, she still wouldn't be it. The impersonator, I mean."

Grandma and Sophie Carlton were standing by the window in the private office, sipping coffee and admiring the potted plants on the sill, when Pixy came back from his visit with old Mrs. Rathmore. He threw his jacket over the back of his swivel chair, sat down, and put his head in his hands.

"Are you feeling ill, dear?" asked Sophie Carlton, concerned.

"You do not look happy," said Grandma darkly. "What horrible thing have you found out over at Mrs. Rathmore's? Was the 'friend' anybody we know?"

"Yeah. Bogman."

"Bogman!" cried Grandma, astonished. "Our neighbor Bogman?"

"Right. Tiffy's dad," Pixy said dully.

"But it couldn't be him. Bogman isn't *that* crazy! And *why?*" Grandma sat down behind her desk. "I mean, what in the world could have been his motive for such a mean prank? Did he hold some sort of grudge against Ted Reith? Against Lancaster or Atwell? Or did the drink do something to his brains? Seems to me, he's been turning into a real bum lately."

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Pixy put his elbows on his desk and rested his chin in his hands. Then he said in a very quiet voice, "On the way back here I stopped by Bogman's house. I wanted to talk to him alone. You know, with Tiffy being his daughter, and all." He sighed deeply. "I hadn't known that he had worked for Ted Reith. It just never came up."

"Ted Reith? Bogman worked for Reith Lumber?"

"Yeah, and I feel just awful."

"I understand, Pixy. But I'm so shocked, even though I never could stand the man." She almost added "and that snippy daughter of his." Kindly, she didn't. "Tell us the whole thing, dear. We'll sort it all out later."

So Pixy leaned back in his chair and told the whole bizarre story as Bogman had told it to him.

Bogman had resented, very much so, having to retire — because of company policy—at the early age of sixty-five from the lumberyard where he'd been employed for over twenty years. He had pled with Ted Reith to keep him on for a couple of years longer, had begged to stay on at least until his mortgage was paid off. But his boss had shaken his head, had talked about starting a new phase in life, had yakked about enjoying one's Golden Years, one's Autumn of Life.

So Bogman, a quiet, unassuming little man, had started to brood. The more he thought about his empty future, the more depressed he became. He started to grow a beard, told himself he was old. *Old.*

Then one day a couple of weeks ago, on his usual evening walk down to the corner store, he had found out that the new house that was to be built in the middle of his block, in his quiet, friendly neighborhood, was going to be his boss's new residence. And Bogman had seen red. It was too unfair, so—he couldn't even think straight. Here, he, hardworking and faithful old Bogman, wouldn't be able to keep up the payments on his little house, while that *toad,* that low-down *reptile,* was moving into the neighborhood, into the biggest house yet.

So Bogman had gone on to the liquor store and had bought himself a twenty-six ounce bottle of white rum. Had gone home, had finished most of the stuff, had plotted the most fantastic prank for revenge. What a laugh it would be, throwing the Big Boss a few curves! Let his precious Reith Lumber get a bit of a bad name. Maybe even let the whole town think that the owner of that wonderful company didn't trust his own material for his new house, and had to order all the lumber from other places.

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The following day he had put on his best suit, assumed his dead friend Andy Rathmore's name, and gone to one of Ted Reith's rival lumber companies and ordered the material for a twenty-six hundred square foot ranchstyle house. Actually he hadn't really counted on getting away with the mischief, for after all, having the lumber for the new house of a lumberyard owner delivered from a rival was quite something. But of course he hadn't let on, had in fact been quite the actor, and the transaction had been so simple at the end. The man, Johnny Lancaster, had been so eager to do business that it had been almost fun. And later, yes it was the same day, he, Bogman, had gone to yet a second lumberyard and ordered—They knew the rest.

"Maybe we should drive out to see Ted Reith once more. I do hope he has quieted down some. He seemed awfully upset last night when he was interviewed by the television people. But," said Grandma, "even though the case is more or less wrapped up for us, the whole thing really is a little sad. I'm thinking of all the embarrassment Bogman has caused. If only he weren't such a pathetic little man. I feel truly sorry for him." She didn't add that she felt sorry for her young partner as well. What if Pixy were to *marry* that snippy daughter of the drunk? Oh gawd!

So the detectives closed their office at the usual time, had their evening meal in a small restaurant, then drove out to Marquince Street and parked in the Reith driveway.

Ted Reith was on the lawn, teaching a small beagle to sit and stay. How could such a heartless boss, Grandma thought, be so patient with a dear little dog?

"Well, hello again!" called Ted Reith. He didn't look especially upset any more. He picked up his beagle and came over to the Volkswagen. "I'm sure relieved things have been sorted out." He tickled the little dog under the chin, and Grandma took one of its soft paws in her hand.

"You should be so kind to people," she said, "especially to older ones like Bogman."

Ted Reith put down the dog. "So it was Bogman, then," he said. "But what about Bogman? He doesn't work for me any more. Did you see the news last night? The man has made a laughingstock of me. Made my rivals look like a couple of dummies, too—which of course they are. But I, the owner of Reith Lumber, am really—"

"You'll have to admit," Pixy broke in, "that you did a crummy thing, too, letting Bogman go because he'd turned sixty-five."

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"Yeah," mocked Grandma. "Company policy! No such thing in *our* agency!"

Ted Reith looked from one detective to the other.

"There are a couple of things you don't know about Bogman," he said. He scratched the side of his nose, looked down at his shoes. "The sad truth is that Bogman has not been a reliable employee for the past couple of years. Could have paid off all his debts if it hadn't been for the drink. We more or less carried him along till retirement age, if you know what I mean. We could have let him go before."

Two weeks later—they had solved a particularly nasty fraud case in the meantime and had attended Johnny Lancaster's wedding—Grandma and Pixy were working in their yards, getting things nice and neat once again. They were both standing on stepladders, on either side of the honeysuckle hedge, snipping away at errant branches.

"I noticed," Grandma said, "that the Bogmans have moved out of their house. It's sad, but that's the way it goes. I must say, Bogman sure was lucky, having the charges dropped against him. That was really nice of Lancaster and Atwell."

"It took a lot of guts, though, for him to apologize publicly on the News Hour. Then again, the lumberyards got a couple of free plugs from it." Pixy got down from his stepladder and sat on one of the lower rungs.

Grandma was finished on her side also, and she pushed her way through the hedge to her neighbor's side and sat down on one of the garden chairs.

"So it all ended well," she said. "We even got a good fee out of that silly case. It was sweet of the three lumberyard owners to split the cost. Ted Reith will make a good neighbor. By the way, Pixy, was that pretty little brunette I saw you with in town yesterday a new girlfriend?"

Her partner beamed. "That was Elizabeth. Elizabeth Reith."

"Let me guess," laughed Grandma. "She's related to our soon-to-be neighbor across the street."

"You are right, as always! Yes, she's Ted Reith's daughter."

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UNSOLVED

by

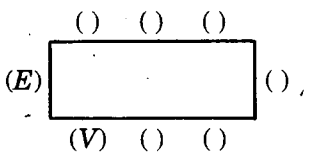
George J. Summers

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

Helen and her husband, Helmut, gave a dinner party to which they invited: her brother, Blair, and Blair's wife, Blanche; her sister, Sheila, and Sheila's husband, Sherman; and her neighbor, Nora, and Nora's husband, Norton. One of the eight was an extortionist and one of the other seven was the extortionist's victim.

While they were all seated at the table, the victim unsuccessfully attempted to stab the extortionist with a steak knife. The chairs were arranged around the table as in the diagram below.



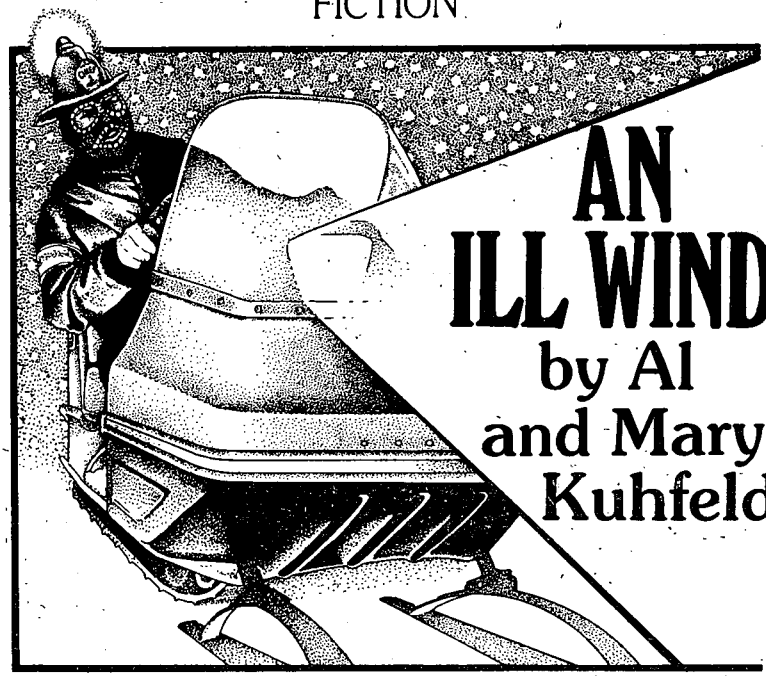
1. The extortionist sat in the chair marked *E*.
2. The victim sat in the chair marked *V*.
3. Each man sat across from a woman.
4. Each man sat between a man and a woman.
5. The extortionist's spouse and the victim's spouse sat next to each other.
6. The host sat between the victim and the hostess.
7. Blair sat between Sheila and Norton.

Who was the extortionist?

See page 135 for the solution to the March puzzle.

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AN ILL WIND

by Al and Mary Kuhfeld

It wasn't fair. Yesterday afternoon Hedeby had broken all records for late December by about ten degrees. Shirtsleeved kids had thrown frisbees to leaping dogs. Old folks had puttered in their yards. It had peaked at three with sixty-four warm, sunny degrees. Of course, by seven it had clouded up and by nine it had started to rain. By midnight last night, when he came on duty, it was sleeting. And this morning, under a bitter, driving wind, there were sixteen inches of snow on the ground. With more coming. It wasn't fair.

His shift would be over in fifteen minutes, but the streets were blocked; he couldn't get home. Which was just as well; his relief wouldn't be able to get in. Hafner went to the second story window and scraped a little circle in the frost. The snow was flying horizontally down Broad Street. Technically the sun was up, but all it could do was turn the buildings across the street into gray silhouettes against the gray sky. Jesus, a real Minnesota blizzard.

Doggedly trying to see the good in the situation, Hafner reflected that it would probably

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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be a quiet shift. Even the most ambitious criminal would hole up in weather like this.

He heard someone coming down the hall and, surprised, reached for his suitcoat. He had only one arm in its sleeve when the squad room door opened, and he froze in astonishment at the apparition before him.

It was tall, way over six feet, bulky, and encased in snow and ice. Its face was a glitter of tiny icicles spangled over a blue ski mask. And topping that, also covered by ice and snow, was a plastic fire helmet several sizes too small. A tiny red light atop the helmet flashed bravely through the ice, and a toy siren was sounding.

The figure reached up, shedding slabs of snow, and removed the helmet. "Like it?"

Hafner recognized the voice. "Nygaard! You bastard, you like to scared me to death! What are you doing here?"

"I work here, remember? It's time for me to go on duty." Nygaard pulled off the ski mask, revealing a blocky red face under a sheaf of straight blond hair. He walked stiffly into the room.

Hafner, a smaller, darker man, by nature neat and conservative, got out of his way. "Hold it, dammit! You're getting everything wet! Why didn't you take that snowsuit off out in the hall?"

"Well, hell, Jack, it's dark out in the hall; I couldn't find the zippers." Because of the blizzard, the police department was mostly unmanned, and almost all the lights were turned off. Nygaard bent to dig for the zipper in the left leg of his suit, flinging bits of melting snow in all directions.

"Watch where you're throwing that stuff, for Christ's sake! Anyway, how'd you get here? I heard all the roads are closed."

"They are. But I bought a snowmobile last year, and it just eats up weather like this." Nygaard began picking at the zipper of his other leg with massive fingers. "The department ought to buy a couple of them. Issue blue ski masks—red for the plainclothes," he said, with a broad grin. He unzipped the leg to the knee then straightened and began the same operation on his sleeves. "I had no problem at all coming in. You got to watch out for the buried fireplugs, though; they can tear the bottom out of your machine."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"So they tell me," replied Nygaard indifferently, unseaming the suit from chin to crotch and stepping out of it. Underneath, he was wearing jeans and a blue plaid flannel shirt. He was almost as massive a presence out of the suit as in it. He took

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the suit out into the hall to beat most of the snow and ice off it, then came back to hang it on the coatrack. He looked around at the empty desks. "So," he said, "I guess we're it for detectives, huh? Anything going down?" He sat on the edge of his desk, shifting his belt holster so his gun wouldn't poke him in the kidney.

"Are you kidding? In this weather? And a good thing, too; I'm not dressed to go out in this." Hafner took his suitcoat off and hung it carefully over the back of a chair. It belonged to his best suit, a lightweight wool blend in a black pinstripe. He'd been scheduled for a court appearance today, after he got off duty, and so had dressed up. "I've got no gloves, no hat, and no boots," he complained. "The idiot weatherman said cloudy, with showers, so I just wore my raincoat in last night."

"Yeah, I heard him," said Nygaard, grinning. "How about we call him up and tell him he oughta help us shovel the eighteen inches of cloudy off our sidewalk?"

Despite himself, Hafner chuckled. Thor Nygaard was bright, inventive, and cheerful: at twenty-seven their youngest detective, and the screwiest man alive.

"Anyone else here?"

"Some of the night shift left over. There's four uniforms, one on the front desk, one running the switchboard, one upstairs helping Deputy Marsh hold down the jail, and one trying to rustle up enough grounds to make us some coffee."

"Oh God, no coffee?" groaned Nygaard. He could drink a gallon of coffee per shift.

"There's about a cup left."

Nygaard went to lift his mug off one of the hooks beside the twenty-cup maker. "Maybe a store will open up later and I can take the snowmobile on a food run."

Hafner brightened. "Yeah, Ferguson over on Humphrey lives upstairs from his grocery store. Maybe he'll open up. Good idea. Otherwise it's cheese curls and Hershey bars from the machine."

Nygaard tipped the coffee maker to drain the bitter dregs into his mug, which was light blue and said *uff da*—Norwegian for *oy vey*—in yellow. Hafner asked, "What was the idea of that crazy helmet you were wearing when you came in?"

"Visibility is almost zero out there. I was wishing out loud I had a light and siren for the snowmobile when Eric handed me his favorite toy. He was so pleased to be helpful, how could I tell him no?" The big cop looked fondly at his son's helmet, which was stealthily wetting down the master copy of a

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monthly arrest report. He tasted his coffee and made a face, but resolutely drank more.

The snow began to let up an hour later, and by ten the sky was clearing. Patrolman Davis had borrowed some coffee from the jail and the red light on the twenty-cup maker was glowing comfortingly. Hafner sat near the window nursing a cup—his mug was white and said nothing—and watched as the sun came shyly out. The street outside was a lushly draped and sparkling desert. Drifts came halfway up doors, and blue hollows had formed around lampposts and the back of an abandoned car.

Most of Hedeby's city employees were themselves snowed in; so despite the clear skies, all but the main arteries were going to stay blocked for hours. Hafner watched a big snowplow struggle to clear a single lane up Broad Street, walling in the abandoned car in the process.

Nygaard's phone rang, and he scooped up the receiver with a big hand. "Detective Division, Sergeant Nygaard, may I help you?"

Hafner could hear the gabble of an excited voice from his place by the window. He stiffened and listened alertly to Nygaard's end of the conversation.

"Yes, all right; now calm down. What's your name?" Nygaard grabbed a pencil and began to scrawl. "Where are you right now? No, I mean the address. And that's where the body is? Who is the deceased? You're absolutely sure she's dead? I see, yeah, yeah. Now look, you stay there, but don't touch anything. That's very important. No, we'll be out. Yes, I'm aware the streets are blocked, but we'll get there."

Nygaard threw the receiver back into its cradle and said, "It's Sarah Fiske. Dead, apparently murdered by a burglar."

"Jesus Christ!" Hafner jumped to his feet. Old Mrs. Fiske was the town's most famous eccentric: reclusive, crochety, very well-off. "Who found her?"

"George Grimby." Nygaard looked at his notes. "He says he came and cleared her sidewalks, then didn't get an answer when he knocked to get paid. He went around to the back, found the back door unlocked, and the place ransacked. She was in the living room, her head beaten in."

"Is he the Grimby with a poker game in his basement every Wednesday night?"

"Sounded like him." George Grimby's two sources of income were a weekly poker game and a string of odd jobs he did around town. He was "known to the police," but since a number of important people—including the police chief—turned up on occasion at

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the poker games, they hadn't been raided in several years.

"He there now?"

"Yeah. Have you ever ridden on a snowmobile?"

"No, why?"

"Because we've got to go take a look, that's why. And the snowmobile is the only way we've got of getting there. Grab the kit. I'll go look in the property room for something warm you can wear."

Hafner soon found himself in a too-big overcoat, patched Wellington boots, and a large hat made of gray bunny fur. He drew the line at the white mittens with yellow daisies embroidered on them; instead he stuck his hands into the pockets of Nygaard's snowmobile suit and suffered the wind to blow up the sleeves of his borrowed overcoat.

But worst of all, Nygaard insisted on wearing that goddam siren helmet. It was only a fifteen minute ride to Mrs. Fiske's house, but there were people out shoveling their walks, glad for an excuse to stop and stare. Hafner buried his face in Nygaard's broad back and hoped the big coat and furry hat were disguise enough.

Mrs. Fiske's house was on a big, tree-studded corner lot. It was a Spanish colonial with a red tile roof and wrought iron trim at the windows. An orange snowblower stood, snow-clogged, by the front steps.

The door opened as they walked up; apparently George Grimby had been looking out the window for them.

"Thank God, thank God," he exclaimed. "Come in!" He gave a startled glance at the toy helmet, but apparently found nothing strange about the fur hat. He was a small, slat-thin man with shifty eyes and bad teeth. He wore a ragged blue jacket over two pairs of overalls.

The two detectives stomped snow off their boots in the entrance hall and peered into the living room. Nygaard made a sucking noise through his teeth. It was a very thoroughly ransacked room: in addition to the usual burglary-type disorder, the couch was overturned, the heavy drapes were in a tumble on the floor, and the carpet was pulled up along one wall.

"She tried to fight him off, you think?" asked Hafner.

"Dunno," said Nygaard doubtfully.

Near the brick fireplace lay the body of a woman in her sixties. She had an aristocratic nose and what had once been a carefully arranged bun of graying hair. She was wearing a dark silk dress. A fireplace poker lay near the body.

Hafner unbuttoned the borrowed topcoat as he walked into the living room, but didn't take

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it off; it was cold in the house. He glanced around, absorbing detail, then knelt beside the body, putting a heavy metal case down within reach. "Have you touched her?" he asked.

Grimby said nervously, "I touched her hand, but it was cold and—and kind of stiff, so I knew she was dead. That's why I called you instead of an ambulance."

Hafner pried open an eye and found her glaring in an affronted way at him through a clouded cornea, so he closed it again.

"How did you happen to find her?" he asked.

"Well, like I told you guys when I called, I came to plow the city sidewalk and the sidewalk up to her front door. I do stuff like that for her—yard work and such. We have—had an agreement that every time it snowed I'd do her walks. She always paid on the spot, cash, so I came up to get my money and she didn't answer the door." He looked around at the drawn blinds and shrugged. "She's almost always home, y'know. Sends out for anything she needs. I went around to the back, saw the back door open a little. That surprised me; she keeps her doors closed and locked all the time. So I looked in. The kitchen was a wreck, and she didn't answer when I called out, so I came in to see if she was all right, and here she was." His little dark eyes darted from one to the other, as if to see if they believed him. He must not have liked what he saw because he said, "Now, hold on! You can see she's been dead a while, can't you? All cold and stiff? So it wasn't me! I just got here!"

Nygaard said, "I'll go look around, all right?"

"Go ahead," Hafner said.

Grimby said, "I got some other snow clearing to do. Can I go now?"

Hafner said, too politely, "May I ask you to stay a while? There may be more questions I or my partner will want to ask you, if you don't mind, Mr. Grimby."

Again the nervous shifting of the eyes. "Sure. Always willing to cooperate, that's me." He went to stand near the overturned couch, and tried not to look too curious about Hafner's examination of the late Mrs. Fiske.

There were two distinct places where she had been struck on the head: once on the crown and again just into the hairline behind her temple. There might have been more skull injuries, but he couldn't see without moving her, and he didn't want to disturb the body until it had been photographed. Both blows had broken her skull, and either of them might have proved fatal. There was no other visible

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evidence of injury. Grimby had been right about the stiff hand; rigor was well established in the body.

Hafner opened the kit and got out a little brush and a jar of gray powder. "You live, what, five, six blocks from here, Mr. Grimby?"

"Uh, yes."

He dusted the handle of the poker, but it had been wiped clean. That was to be expected; everyone knew about fingerprints nowadays. "How did you get here through all the snow?"

"Used the snowblower. I had two other jobs on my way, so I did them, and just cleared a little path the rest of the way."

"Did you notice any footprints around the house when you came?"

Grimby thought and shook his head. "No. No, I'm sure I didn't."

"When did you see her last?"

"Yesterday."

"Really? What time yesterday?"

Grimby drew his shoulders up as the possible meaning of that "really" sank in. "'Bout ten, I think. Before noon, anyhow."

"You saw her here, at home?"

". . . Yeah. She got this idea she wanted to see tulips over her breakfast table next spring, so she called me up and asked me to come over. She told me to dig up the tulips I planted in her front yard in October and put them under her kitchen window. I come over to spade up a flower bed. Took me two hours, and she paid me ten dollars."

"Was she wearing the dress she has on now?"

Grimby glanced at the body and away again. "No, somethin' a lighter color, with flowers, I think."

"Was she here alone?"

Grimby shrugged. "I guess so. I didn't see nobody else. But I wasn't really lookin', y'know. I didn't come in, 'cause I was all over dirt. She paid me at the back door and I left."

"I see. Is there a relative of hers in town you know of, Mr. Grimby? We need someone to make formal identification and tell us where the body is to go."

"Just one, a nephew. Lives right up the street. Whenever she didn't like my work she'd threaten to get him to do it. But she never did."

"What's his name?"

"Mr. Olson. I don't know his front name."

Nygaard came back into the living room while Hafner was sighing his way down the long list of Olsons in the phone book—Hedeby was heavily Scandinavian—looking for the Olson who lived a few numbers up on Seventh Street. He stopped looking long enough to ask, "Find anything?"

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"The whole house looks as bad as this room. Who are you going to call?"

"Ah, here it is. A Mr. Randolph Olson. He's her nephew. I'll ask him to come over."

"Fine. It's cold in here because the thermostat is turned down low and there's a broken window in the kitchen."

Hafner was dialing, using the back of his pen and holding the receiver in a peculiar way so as not to disturb any fingerprints. "That the means of entry?"

"Come see for yourself."

Randolph Olson agreed, after expressions of shock, to come over. He proved to be a tall, bluff, hearty man with a red face and a meager cover of dark hair. He shied visibly at the sight of his aunt. "Oh, my," he said. "Poor old thing!"

"I take it she is Sarah Fiske?" asked Hafner.

"Oh, yes. Er, couldn't you cover her or something? She looks indecent."

She didn't look indecent to Hafner. She looked like a formidable dowager who was about to sit up and order everyone out. "I wish we could cover her, Mr. Olson," said Hafner. "But we didn't bring anything with us, and we don't want to use anything in the house until the investigation is complete."

"If she makes you uncomfortable, come out into the kitchen," said Nygaard. "In fact, everyone come. I've got some questions, if you don't mind."

"Sure," said Olson.

"All right," said Grimby.

The kitchen was high-ceilinged, like the rest of the downstairs. It was very large and well equipped, if old fashioned. A number of the cabinets had been emptied onto the tile floor, and the men stepped carefully. "Please be careful," warned Nygaard when Olson started to approach the broken window.

"Eh?" said Olson, stopping. "This is where he got in, right? The burglar."

"Looks like it," said Nygaard. "So please don't step in the glass under the window. We can learn things from it."

Olson stared at the shards on the floor, some of which had fallen on scattered tea leaves. "You can? What sorts of things?"

"Oh, whether it was cut out or smashed. Things like that."

"I see."

"I never seen a burglarized house before," said Grimby. "I didn't know they left such a mess."

"There are some unusual features to this burglary," said Nygaard. "For example, here in the kitchen he cleaned out some of the shelves entirely and left others completely alone. I wonder if he wasn't more out to make a mess than to look for valuables."

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"How do you mean?" asked Olson sharply.

"Well, that high shelf, for example," said Nygaard. He walked carefully to one of the cupboards and gestured up at a shelf. "See, the one with the sugar bowl on it, and the big platters. It hasn't been touched, but a sugar bowl is traditionally the place where householders keep money." Nygaard reached up and stuck a forefinger into the bowl, drawing it out coated whitely. He was easily tall enough to do so without otherwise disturbing the bowl. He grinned and sucked the finger clean. "Nope, just sugar."

"Maybe he was too short to reach up that high," said Hafner.

"No, on the contrary, I think he was a tall man," said Nygaard.

"Well, since I'm only five six, can I go?" asked Grimby.

"No, sir, not just yet," said Hafner, who had gone to squat over the broken window pane.

"Mr. Olson, when did you last see your aunt?" asked Nygaard.

"Yesterday. She invited me to dinner." He looked around the kitchen, saw the open refrigerator door. "See, there's the leftover pot roast. She had time to clear away and wash up before the burglar came."

"Dumb burglar, to come in while she was still up," said Hafner.

"How do you know that?" asked Grimby.

"She's fully dressed. No one dresses to come down and confront a burglar," said Hafner.

"Maybe it happened this morning," suggested Olson. "She's a very early riser."

"Can you imagine a burglar out blundering around in that storm?" said Hafner aggrievedly.

"Did you have dinner regularly with your aunt?" asked Nygaard.

"Oh, perhaps twice a month. To discuss her investments. I like to think I have a certain understanding of fiscal matters."

"Was she a wealthy woman?" asked Hafner.

Olson became judicious. "That depends on your definition of wealth. Not a millionaire, certainly. But comfortable, very comfortable."

"Are you a stockbroker?" asked Nygaard.

"No, no, nothing like that. I was left a small inheritance some years back, and I live on that. I dabble, merely dabble, with investments."

"Does Mrs. Fiske have any children?" asked Hafner.

"No. The family has not been very, er, prolific, in recent generations. I myself am a bachelor and, in fact, my aunt's only living relative, apart from a cousin and his family in Des Moines.

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He has four children by three wives, a remarkable record when one considers how much of his life has been spent behind bars." Olson touched the hair above one ear in a gratified way. "Phillip has been quite a disappointment to Aunt Sarah."

"Mr. Grimby says your aunt stayed at home most of the time. Is that correct?" asked Hafner.

"Yes, she didn't like, er, rubbing elbows with strangers," said Olson. "And she never went anywhere after Thanksgiving; she claimed that was the reason she never had a cold." He shrugged, somewhat embarrassed. "She was a trifle eccentric, you know. But a lovely lady, lovely. And very generous to me."

"Generous?" asked Nygaard.

"Her needs were modest, so she supplemented my income with a monthly allowance. I reciprocated with financial advice. For instance, I had advised her that it was possible to divest herself of some of her wealth at some future date to avoid death duties. That was the subject of our dinner meeting. I offered to handle the matter for her."

"This 'divestment'—was any of it to come to you?" asked Nygaard.

"Here, now, I find that question impertinent," said Olson stiffly. But Nygaard only waited, so he went on, "Well, yes, a great deal of it was to be mine. But you seem to forget, sir: If she was going to give it to me, I had no motive to kill her."

"No one's making any accusations just yet," said Hafner. "We're here to collect facts and hold things down until a proper investigative team arrives, okay?"

"Sorry, you'll have to excuse me; I'm upset," apologized Olson. "This is a shocking thing, shocking. My poor aunt—" He tried to repress a sob, or affect one, Hafner couldn't tell which.

"Yes, the killer was a cold-blooded bastard," said Nygaard.

"What makes you say that?" asked Grimby.

"He couldn't have ransacked the house with her standing there watching. And, by both your and Mr. Olson's statements, she didn't come in from outside and surprise him. So he killed her and then spent a long time searching the house. Most burglars panic and bolt if they happen to kill someone."

"Why—why, that's very clever of you," said Olson.

Hafner asked, "Was your aunt in the habit of keeping cash and valuables in the house?"

"Unfortunately, yes," replied Olson. "Her father lost half his fortune when two of the banks in town failed back in the thirties, so she kept only a modest

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balance in a single savings account. Whenever a dividend or interest check arrived, she would go cash it. There may have been several thousand in cash in this house. A nasty habit, and a stupid one, but there you are. And she had a lot of fine silver and some good pieces of jewelry."

Grimby glanced into the big pantry. "Looks like he found the silver," he said, nodding at an empty wooden chest lying open on the shelf. A drift of flour across its green felt lining was reminiscent of conditions outside.

Hafner went to the broken window, careful not to disturb the broken glass, and peered out. An icy wind made him pull the too-big overcoat closed. "What's in the garage?" he asked. It was a two-car garage, with an enormous drift leaning up against the door.

"A '49 Cadillac, almost a collector's item, I guess," said Olson. "I doubt if it has ten thousand miles on it."

"It's up on blocks," offered Grimby. "I did that for her the day after Thanksgiving, the same day I put her lawn furniture in there."

"How about we go take a look?" said Nygaard.

Hafner started to object, then caught the meaning look on Nygaard's face. "All right," he said. "You two stay here, okay?"

"Can we turn the heat up?" asked Grimby—the snow on his overalls was melting and he was shivering.

" 'Fraid not," said Hafner. "I want everything left just as it is. Each of you watch the other to make sure nothing is accidentally moved, okay?"

Grimby and Olson looked at each other warily. "Sure," said Grimby, and Olson nodded affirmatively.

The two policemen waded through the snow to the garage. Inside, one half was taken up with the large and elderly Cadillac, the other filled with lawn care equipment and lawn furniture. Like the car, everything was old but of good quality and in excellent repair. Nothing had been disturbed, which did not seem to surprise them.

"What do you think?" asked Hafner.

"Did you see those tea leaves all over the floor? Apparently Mrs. Fiske liked to make her tea without bags."

"So?"

"There are pieces of broken glass from the window lying on top of some of them."

"Yeah, I saw that," said Hafner. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and wished Nygaard had suggested they go up to one of the bedrooms in the house. "Grimby said he dug a flower bed yesterday under her kitchen windows and planted tulip bulbs

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for her. Are you thinking we'll find only Grimby's footprints in it?"

"We'll find no one's," said Nygaard, pulling his ski mask down over his ears. He had rolled it up so it resembled a knit cap. "Grimby would've raked his out when he finished digging it up. And no one's been across it since. That window was broken after the kitchen was trashed—cut out, then dropped on the floor to make it look like it was done from the outside. There's a glass cutter in one of the kitchen drawers. She was killed by someone she'd let into the house."

"So you think Grimby, too. I agree, no real burglar searched that house. Tearing up the carpet, for Christ's sake—Grimby knew about the money, and he could have come back in the evening, after Olson left. And he's not exactly a law-abiding citizen."

"No, not Grimby," disagreed Nygaard. "Come on, can't you see what happened?" The big detective touched the side of his nose and said, "Olson comes to dinner and Aunt Sarah tells him she's going to stop helping him out. Or maybe that she's changing her will, leaving all the money to a home for retired cat-fanciers or something. Because consider that jerk. Even dead, did Mrs. Fiske look like the kind of sweet dumb old lady who'd take fiscal advice from someone like Olson?"

"Well . . . " said Hafner. He personally wouldn't have trusted Olson to make change for a dollar.

"It might be interesting to check on the way his own investments have been doing lately. I bet he's got a real case of the shorts. Did you see his shoes? Expensive, but badly worn. Same for those trousers. No, he's our man, all right. So he comes to dinner and hears the bad news. He goes with her into the living room, trying to talk her out of it. But she's a stubborn old lady. So he grabs the poker and lets her have it."

"There's a blow on the top of her head, near the back, consistent with a blow from behind. And another that might have been struck after she fell," Hafner said.

"From behind? She wouldn't turn her back on a stranger," said Nygaard. "Right?"

"She'd turn her back on Grimby."

Nygaard ignored that. "So there he is with a body. What to do? Aha, make it look like it happened after he left. She's a recluse, right? Hardly ever a visitor. In a day or so it will be impossible to tell just when it happened. So he cleans up in the kitchen, washing dishes and putting things away. Then he tries to make it look as if a very

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thorough burglar's paid a call. But he's never seen a burglarized house, and he overdoes it. And he breaks the window in the kitchen only *after* he's finished pulling things out, after he's spilled her tea leaves on the floor. It's dark out by then; he doesn't see the new flowerbed, so he doesn't think about footprints."

"How do you know there aren't footprints under all that snow?" argued Hafner. "Grimby's footprints."

"Naw, Grimby's smarter than that. He'd have chosen a different window."

"Or put on outsized boots, and left fake footprints," said Hafner. "He didn't know it was going to snow, remember. Suppose there *are* footprints? Dammit, Grimby's a crook!"

"Is he? Our beloved chief plays poker with him about once a month, and so do Mayor Anderson and Judge Lundquist. The game may not be legal, but I bet it's honest."

Hafner, unconvinced, shrugged, blew on his cold hands, and turned to look around.

There was one shiny new object in the garage, a strange contraption that looked like a cross between a vacuum cleaner and an outboard motor, with buckles and straps. Hafner stared at it. Catching Nygaard's grin at his mystification, he growled, "All right, wise guy: What is it?"

"A leaf blower. You buckle it on and it blows your leaves into a big pile—or into your neighbor's yard, if you're out of plastic bags. A friend of mine has one, and I borrowed it once. It's like wearing a jet plane, but it works real well. You really think Grimby?"

"Oh, hell, yeah. Stands out all over him. Twitchy, nervous, couldn't look me in the eyes."

"He's always like that."

"How do you know?"

"Same way I know how often hizzoner sits in the poker game. Tell me, when did Grimby do it? What did you find when you looked at the body?"

"She's been dead at least twelve hours. Rigor's completely established, which takes eight to twelve hours, coming on quicker if it's colder—and it's cold in the house. But her corneas are clouded, which takes between twelve and twenty-four hours if the eyes are closed, and they were." Hafner had consulted a Crossly Checklist taped to the inside lid of the investigations kit to determine the time of death.

Nygaard looked at his watch. "Twelve hours ago would make it eleven last night. If she's a very early riser, she'd've been in bed before then. Say she was dead by ten at the latest. If they lingered over coffee, Olson might

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not have gotten out of there until eight. That's cutting it fine, if Grimby came after Olson left."

"If he left at eight, that's two hours."

"An autopsy will show how soon after her meal she died. I'm betting it was immediately."

"And I'm thinking it wasn't. So what do you suggest, we arrest both of them? I don't think we have enough evidence to hold either of them, if it comes down to it. Damn, I wish we could get a look at that flowerbed! But we'd spoil the evidence if we used a shovel, and I'm hanged if I'm going to get out there on my hands and knees with a camelhair brush. It'll be hours before we can get a crew out here."

"We'll have to let them go—and the guilty one will pack his bags and rabbit." It was Nygaard's turn to look dispiritedly around the big garage. "You know, if I had one of those leaf blowers and a pair of skis, I wouldn't need my snowmobile. I wonder—Here, gimme a hand!" He went to lift the device off the wall.

"The crazy helmet wasn't enough for you?" asked Hafner incredulously.

"No, I'm serious! C'mon, this thing's heavy!"

Reluctantly, Hafner went to help Nygaard fasten the contraption on his back. The metal was cold enough to make him hiss when his bare hands touched it. But when Nygaard explained his idea, he nodded, then went gratefully back into the house, where it was a little warmer.

"What's he doing out there?" demanded Olson a few minutes later, bending to look out the broken window as Nygaard aproached from outside.

"That's Mrs. Fiske's leaf blower," said Grimby. "Hey, he's started it up!"

The trio watched in amazement as the big man vanished behind a cloud of snow.

"He's uncovering a flowerbed," said Hafner.

"There's no flowerbed under this window," said Olson.

"Yes, there is," said Grimby. "I dug it myself just yesterday. I know what he's doing; he's looking for footprints, right? The burglar's footprints."

"Yes, that's right," said Hafner. "It would have been impossible for anyone to have climbed through that window without leaving footprints. Unless, of course, he didn't climb through the window at all, but broke it after Mrs. Fiske let him in, after he killed her and tore the house apart to make it look like a burglar was here."

Grimby made a whistling mouth, but no sound came out. Olson, on the other hand, made

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a dash for the front door. Hafner, startled, let him get halfway to the door before running after him. By the time he caught up with him, Olson was sitting on the snowmobile, trying to find the starter.

Hafner dragged him off the machine and threw him face down into a snowdrift, and sat on him while fumbling his handcuffs out. Snow shovelers stopped to stare. Hafner said, "Randolph Olson, you are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent—"

"I want a lawyer!" yelled Olson.

"You have the right to consult an attorney," agreed Hafner, hauling Olson's right hand up and fastening it to his left. "If you want an attorney and can't afford one, we'll provide one for you."

"I'm not that broke," muttered Olson, a damaging admission.

Hafner took him back inside.

"All right, how did you know?" asked Hafner, after Nygaard had put the leaf blower away and come into the house.

"Grimby's too short."

"Too short to what? Climb in through that window?"

"No, too short to put that sugar bowl way up there. And why would he? He isn't the one trying to make it look like Mrs. Fiske cleared up the dinner things after he left. *She* certainly didn't put it way up there. The only other things up on that shelf were things she never used, like those platters, for the sort of big dinners she didn't throw any more. What was a sugar bowl full of sugar—meaning she used it every day—doing up there? Olson's a bachelor; he's never been taught not to put things you use every day up on the high shelves where the women can't get at them."

Hafner thought that over. It was simple once you saw it, just like Nygaard's answer to the problem of clearing the snow away. He grinned. "Can I ask you to come along with me on my next case?" he asked in honest admiration.

Nygaard grinned back. "Sure."

"After the snow melts, of course. So we can drive a car."

Hafner agreed to stay at the house to direct a more thorough investigation when the crew arrived. And Mr. Olson suffered the indignity of having his hands cuffed around Sergeant Nygaard's substantial waist for a snowmobile ride downtown—to the accompaniment of a child's toy siren and flashing red light.

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The Three-Hundred-Dollar Heist

by Barbara Lyons Hall

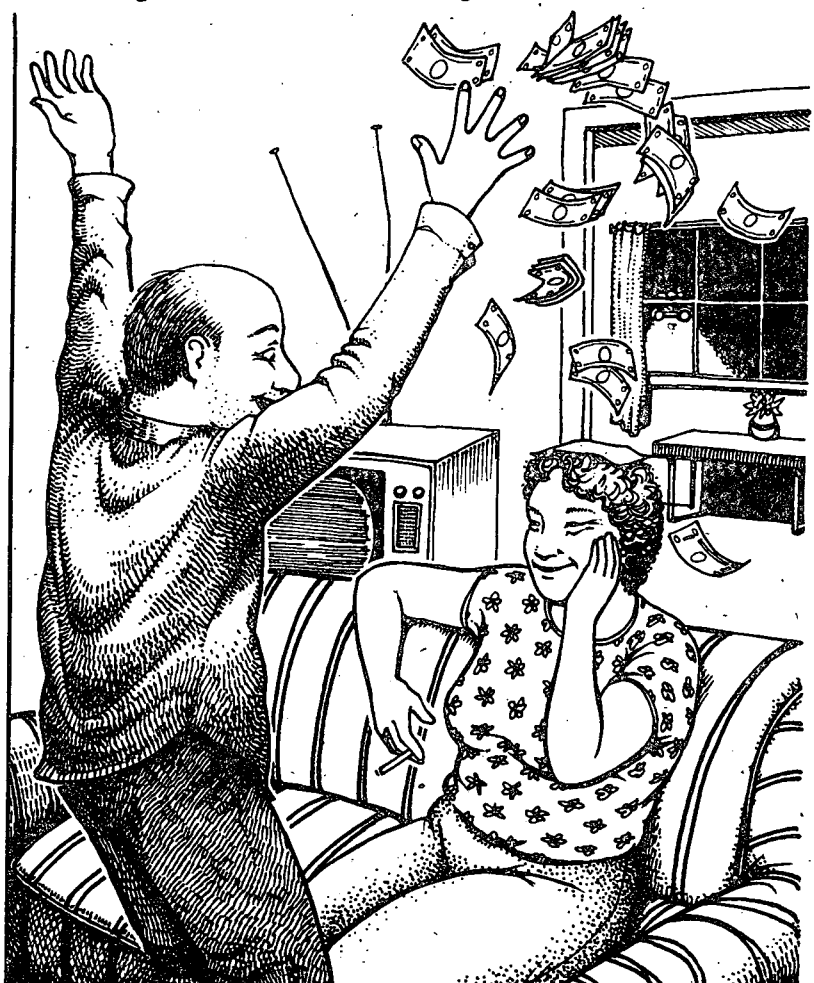


Illustration by Lisa Knouse

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From the window of my office in the back of Heskett's Drug and Variety, I look directly through the pharmacy, straight down the center aisle—between jewelry and pet supplies, past Judy Mayhew's checkout stand, and right at the biggest safe you ever saw in your life. It stands six feet high, it weighs fifteen hundred pounds (empty), and it's blood red with fancy gold letters spelling out Carey Safe Company, Chicago, across two doors. From where I sit the combination dial looks like a gigantic silver eye that sees everything and never blinks. No two ways about it, it's a real humdinger.

Sixteen years ago, when Norlander gave me the combination, I started to do some serious worrying about that safe.

"What if a guy comes in with a gun?" I wanted to know.

Norlander leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Not to worry, Tillie. That's why you and I are back here behind locked doors and the safe's way up there by the front windows."

That night I went home and told Harry about it, but he just grunted from behind his newspaper.

"But, Harry," I said. "What if some guy comes in while I've got the safe open? Maybe he wants to take me hostage or something."

"Hostage? An old tugboat like you? Hell, if he's not completely blind, he'll take one of them cutie pies at the registers."

Well, he had a point I supposed, but I kept worrying anyway. What if we did get a blind robber? What if we got an epileptic robber and he got into a fit with a gun in each hand and started going off like a firecracker, accidentally killing everyone in the place? From that day on, I attracted worries like a garbage can attracts flies.

It all caught up with me, though, around Thanksgiving. It seemed like my stomach was turning into a blast furnace, so I went over to the clinic to see Doc Grissom. He made me drink some ugly white stuff, then he put me on a table and did certain other things while I watched my internals on TV. Afterwards he sat down next to me and smiled that smile Marcus Welby puts on when his patient only has an hour and a half to live.

"You worried about something, Tillie?"

"Only a couple of things."

"Like what?"

"Oh, like the forty pounds you want me to lose. Like Harry being out of work for a year and a half. Like Judy Mayhew playing up to the boss for my job. Like an epileptic robber—"

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"Okay, okay," he said. "I get the picture. But the fact is, you've worried yourself right into an ulcer. Now I'm going to give you some medicine called Tagamet and I want you to forget your problems and try to take it easy. Things have a way of working out, you know."

While he was writing out the prescription, I was wondering how the hundred dollar deductible on my insurance was going to work itself out. Harry's unemployment had dried up in June, and the three hundred dollars we had in savings was gone by September.

To make matters worse, I hadn't told Harry the savings were gone—he'd have gone right through the ceiling into the Tuppermans' sitting room. Harry is a good man, I don't mean to say he's not; but his temper sometimes turns black and he runs around the place kicking furniture and cursing and acting like everything bad that ever happened to him was my fault. So you can see how I went back to Heskett's feeling worse than I had before I went to the doctor.

"Well," said Lola when I walked in, "what'd the doc say?"

"Nothin'," I said. Lola works checkstand one and she's my best friend, but I didn't feel like talking.

"You feel like talking?" she said.

So I told her about the ulcer and about the medicine and how I wasn't supposed to worry. We both had a good laugh at that one.

Lola leaned over the counter. "I don't wanna add to your troubles, Tillie," she said with a look on her face like she had to tell me there was a flood in my office and I'd have to do last year's work all over again, "but Norlander took Judy Mayhew to lunch again. I heard her telling him how she'd always wanted a cushy office job like yours and how lucky you are to get to share an office with him. Ha! I coulda split a gut!"

"She doesn't want my job," I said. "She just wants to feel important. She figures if she can get the combination to the safe she can act like Little Miss High-and-Mighty over the rest of the cashiers. But if she knew the worries that went along with that safe, she'd avoid it like a gumboil."

Lola raised an eyebrow. "Well, I'd keep an eye on the broad if I was you. When they got back, Norlander had a real sappy look on his puss—like there was something going on besides a couple of sandwiches and a beer, if you get my drift."

I got her drift, all right. Ten minutes later I was sitting in my office thinking about her drift over a warm tuna sandwich and a cold cup of coffee

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when I noticed there was something wrong about the change the courier service had brought in from the bank. I hadn't counted it yet, but I just had a feeling. I put my sandwich down slowly and began to count. Sure enough. Quarters—a hundred dollars too much.

I counted it a second time, and then a third, and then I reached for the phone to call Candy over at First National. It was automatic. I always called Candy when the change was off. But after two digits I slammed the phone down again. The change had never been off more than four dollars before.

I looked long and hard at those quarters. Ten rolls. Ten dollars each. Somebody was going to be a hundred short. Another merchant? The bank? Somebody. The courier service would be looking for it by tomorrow morning. Maybe they'd start calling every merchant on the route—or, on second thought, maybe they wouldn't. Maybe they wouldn't want their merchants to know they could lose a hundred dollars. Besides, even if they did call me, Candy would believe whatever I told her. I decided it was all a sign from God—even though I never much believed in Him—and started loading quarters in my purse.

When I left the store at six, my hands were shaking pretty good and I must have been sweating like a fevered pig in a steam bath. Besides trying to keep my shoulder from being ripped right off by about sixty pounds of purse. I had trouble starting my Corvair, probably because it hadn't had a tune-up in four and a half years, but it finally got me to a U-Save Liquor Store on the other side of town. It wasn't too crowded and the guy at the register seemed friendly enough, so I spilled out the rolls of coins and asked him if he could give me some bills.

"Geez, lady," he said. "What'd you do, rob a bank?"

He laughed and I laughed and he counted out five twenties while Mount Vesuvius blew up in my stomach.

By the time I got home I was a wreck and Harry was in one of his black moods. He was sitting in his chair behind the sports section, and he had a real firm grip on his Coors. The rest of the paper was all over the floor, as usual, and the only light on in the place was that old pole lamp we got the day Ike was elected—the kind with the fiberglass cones pointing every which way. He only had the bottom one on, and the whole apartment looked like it hadn't seen the light of day since 1950.

"Where have you been," he said, not even looking around the paper.

I didn't say anything because

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I couldn't think of anything to say. And before I knew it he was up and running around the room, rolling his paper up and waving it around in the air like some kind of maniac. Finally he smashed it on the coffee table, then unrolled it again and sat back down.

"Goddamn fly," he said. But I don't believe there was one.

Lola is a big woman with orange hair and a cigarette permanently attached to the corner of her mouth, which is flamingo pink. Her face is pale and round, like a cold biscuit, and her eyelashes, which she purchases in Heskett's cosmetics department, could swat a fly at twenty paces.

She has been unmarried, off and on, most of her life and because of this—and because, as I already said, she is my best friend—I go over to her place once in a while and spend the night. We might take in a movie or go out for Chinese or we might just sit around playing cards while she tells me all the latest jokes she's heard down at the Red Dog Tavern. Harry never minds that I go—it gives him a chance to go down to the Red Dog and hear the stories himself.

Anyway, after I paid Doc Grissom I felt so relieved I took Lola out to Señor Taco's, where we had chimichangas and beer and refried beans until Lola split the zipper on her good polyester pants. Neither one of us had a safety pin, so we went back to her place and flopped ourselves on the red velvet couch, too full to think about playing cards or watching TV.

"New wallpaper," I said, taking my earrings off and slipping them in my coat pocket. "Nice shade of red."

"Yeah, ain't it? And that flocked stuff don't come cheap!" She kicked off her mules and put her feet up on the coffee table.

I was just wishing I could afford new wallpaper when she turned around and looked right in my eyes, deep, like she could see what was going on way inside my brain. I don't mind telling you it was scary.

"Look, doll," she said. "You and me have known each other a long time, right?"

I nodded.

"I figure I know you pretty good by now, and I know when something's bothering you."

"So?" I turned my head around, pretending to look at the wallpaper on the other wall.

"So, something's been bothering you the last few days. Harry slug you or what?"

I tried to laugh, but it didn't sound right. "Harry wouldn't slug a fly," I said.

"Hey. Don't kid me Harry

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don't have a mean streak. I got a beezer for these things."

"Well he didn't slug me." By now I was wishing there was a picture or something on the wall. You can only look at wallpaper so long.

"Then what happened you can't tell me about? Come on, honey, this is Lola."

"Nothing," I pleaded. "Honest." I felt confused with her talking to the back of my head, but I just couldn't look at her.

"Whatever," she said, sounding nettled. "I'm gonna hit the sack." She wiggled off the couch, scuffed her shoes back on, and sauntered into the bedroom. I guess it was a good ten minutes before I could turn my head around front again.

Later on, lying there on the couch in the living room, I thought about what a good friend Lola was and about what a good time we'd had and I began to think maybe there really was a God. Just in case, I told Him thanks for the hundred bucks and I asked Him if I started going to church, could he arrange to have Judy Mayhew run over by a truck?

As the days went by I began to act pretty much like normal again. The bank never called about the hundred dollars and Max the courier never mentioned it either. I was taking my Tagamet, and even though I was still worrying, my stomach was beginning to cool down.

It was getting close to Christmas, and at the store, Norlander put on a few extra girls. They were school kids, mostly, and full of the carefree spirit you have before you know too much about things. They smiled at the customers and said Merry Christmas and when they had time they put up decorations all over the store. Lola came back to my office during lunch hours and we ate our sandwiches and watched everything through the window. We talked a lot about whether Judy was sleeping with Norlander and by the time he took his wife to the Caribbean for the holidays there was no sense denying it. He had been a sitting duck.

The Tuesday night before Christmas, I fixed Harry a pork roast. I set the table extra nice with the plastic tablecloth that looks like real lace and lit the red candles I won at bingo two years ago. I even hung up a piece of mistletoe, but I turned off the overhead before Harry came in, so he didn't notice it.

Harry looks real good in candlelight. He's got a big nose—which I always tell him shows character—and his eyebrows are surly and his complexion is rugged from working outdoors (when he works), but candlelight kind of slides across

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his face like melted butter on a roast turkey and it gives him a warm, kindly look. Almost like a doctor.

It was a cosy dinner and things went fine almost all the way through it. But just as I was about to slice the cherry pie, Harry said: "You know that three hundred we got in the bank?"

I almost dropped the knife. "What about it?"

"Draw it out tomorrow."

"What do you want that much money for?" I peeped.

He got a smirky look on his face. "Don't be so nosy around Christmastime."

Now I was sawing at the pie like it was made of mahogany and the knife started to go through the aluminum pan. Cherry juice was running onto the tablecloth.

"For three hundred dollars I got a right to know."

"It's for a Christmas present, and don't ask me who for," he said, like he'd spent that much money on a present a time or two before.

I took my time scooping up the pie so I'd have time to think before I answered him. I had to admit Lola was right about Harry. There were times when he was capable of slugging a person—not that he'd ever had that occasion with me—but there had been more than a couple of times lately that gave me pause to wonder just how wise it would be to tell him he couldn't have three hundred bucks.

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'll get it."

By the next morning I had a plan: I would steal the money from Heskett's. Today, in front of everyone, I would put the change in the safe like always, but today I would also take out three hundred-dollar bills. I would wear my longsleeved blouse with elastic at the wrists and slip the bills up inside and no one would be the wiser. On Thursday I would doctor the deposits and no one would ever question them. After all, Norlander was on vacation and I had sixteen years of credibility.

Max came in about one o'clock, and I counted the change, hoping maybe by some miracle there would be an extra three hundred in it which there wasn't. Then I lugged the bag up to the front of the store and opened the safe. Inside it's got trays for each kind of coin and slots for the different kinds of bills. Around the holidays Norlander puts in a cigar box for the fifties and hundreds that the managers go around and pull out of the registers every couple of hours—just in case.

I put the coins away a little slower than usual, and between the dimes and the nickels I

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reached over and opened up the cigar box. There must have been twenty hundreds in there. I skimmed three of them right off the top and had started to fold them in half when a voice behind me said, "Come on, Tillie. Hurry it up, will ya? I need some ones and a roll of dimes." The voice, I knew without looking, was Judy Mayhew's.

The bills slipped neat as you please right back into the box. I made the change for Judy while she stood there trying not to grin like she'd accidentally found out somebody was going to give her Europe for Christmas. I was so fed up I scrammed back to my office without even looking at those hundreds again.

About that time Harry called and I took a couple of slugs of Tagamet right out of the bottle while he was telling me he was playing poker at Tupperman's tonight. I told him I'd go on over to Lola's, then hung up and took two Tylenols.

Seeing as how Norlander was out getting himself grilled on a beach someplace, I was the only person in the office, and this gave me another brilliant idea.

I went to register one and told Lola I had to run an errand. Then I pulled the Corvair out of the parking lot and around the block onto Redwood Avenue. From there I walked back to Heskett's, stopping on the way at Sammy's to get a pastrami on rye which I had Sammy wrap extra careful and which I slipped into my purse.

I went back to my office like nothing unusual was going on and sat there quietly till almost six. Then I turned off the light, locked the door, and climbed under the desk. About seven o'clock I ate the pastrami sandwich, but I didn't dare drink any coffee because the restrooms are on the other side of the store. It was a long time till nine, and while I was waiting I managed to come up with all kinds of worries. Like what if Harry picks tonight to call Lola's? He never has, but he could. Or what if Lola drives home a new way and happens to spot my car around the corner? Or what if an epileptic robber comes in—

By the time the lights started going off, I had emptied the Tagamet bottle, and I was shaking like a dog that knows he's about to be whipped bad. I poked my head up a little so I could see what was going on and there was Bertie, the night manager, walking around to all the switches whistling, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Up in the front, right by the safe, Judy Mayhew was standing there blinking her eyes at him like some kind of frog in heat.

She started squirting the safe with Windex and wiping it down

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with a paper towel, and after she got it shined up a little she began to look at it the way she'd been looking at Bertie, only worse. I could almost hear her thinking *I got Bertie, and I got Norlander and someday, baby, I'm gonna get you, too.* Anyway, once the doors were real clean she buffed up the handles and dial with her sleeve, then turned back to Bertie, grinning like she was a toad and he was a blue-tail fly. They both laughed.

When the lights were off, you could see their outlines against the windows. Bertie was kissing her and she was kissing him right back, like poor old Norlander never existed. At that moment I hated her—no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

I came out of the office about eleven. When I got past the pharmacy, I could see well enough to walk around without tripping over things. It was eerie. Light from the streetlamps streamed in behind the safe, coloring the whole world deep blue. Black outlines cut their way across counters and checkstands, and registers cast long black shadows where the girls usually stood. I wondered what Lola would think if she could see me now.

I sneaked through cameras, slipped past housewares, and closed in on the safe through Judy's check-out lane. Finally I was there. It loomed over me, the overgrown head of a one-eyed monster. I took a deep breath, rubbed my hands together like the crooks do in the movies, and dialed the first number. It clicked.

"I'm gonna pay it back," I told myself. Or maybe I was telling God.

The second number. Click.

"Fifty dollars a week," I said. "I swear."

By then my hands were shaking off my wrists, like a pair of windshield wipers gone berserk. I leaned against the safe to steady myself. My heart was pounding so loud I thought for a second it was coming over the P.A. system.

I braced my four fingers against the cold metal door and turned the dial with my thumbnail, line by line, until I got to fifty-seven. It clicked. I took a deep breath and grabbed the handles, pulling the doors with all my weight. They slowly swung open, and I stood there for a minute, wiping the sweat off my face with my shoulder and staring at all that money. Thousands and thousands of dollars. I saw it every day, but it never really seemed like money until then. Actual cash you could take downtown and buy a new Hoover vacuum cleaner with. And all those handy attachments.

Just then the lights went on

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and I wheeled around to see Judy Mayhew standing by the light switch. She walked over to me wagging her head and clucking like she was real sorry but she was going to have to rip my arms and legs off and then call the cops.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I asked, backing away from her.

She lunged at me and I lunged at the front door where I knocked Bertie down and ran over him like he was nothing but a cardboard cutout of Mr. Whipple squeezing his toilet paper. I kept running, puffing and pounding the cement, until I was around the corner on Redwood Avenue where it was nice and dark. No one was behind me. I found the car and leaned against it, panting and pushing the hair out of my eyes, until I realized I had no purse. Which meant no keys.

It was one A.M. when I got home. I'd crawled through back yards in neighborhoods I wouldn't have driven through yesterday. I'd seen at least seventeen cops (from behind hedges, behind garbage cans, even behind a telephone pole). I'd sworn there was no God, and—just in case—I'd sworn to Him I'd never steal so much as #2 Ticonderoga pencil again.

By the time Harry got there, I was sitting in the dark wondering whether you can be put in jail for stealing money you never even got your hands on. He clicked on the overhead and bounced in to the tune of "Bye Bye, Blackbird," which he was humming rather loudly.

"Hey, Till!" he said. "I'm glad you're here. I got something to show you." He came over and sat next to me, kissing me and grabbing me here and there. He smelled like Tupperman's cigars.

"Not now, Harry. Please."

"Aw, come on, sugar," he said with a big grin. "Cheer up. I got good news."

It had to be *real* good news. He hadn't called me sugar since 1978, so I kept quiet. He stood up and made a bow, flushed from too much beer.

"Sugar, you can put the cash back in the bank." He whipped a wad of bills out of his pocket. "Daddy won three hundred sixty-six bucks tonight!" With that he did a little dance around the room, cackling like a lunatic and throwing bills all over the place. After a minute I started cackling, too, and pretty soon we were both jumping around and snorting and singing the old songs we used to sing when we were young and ignorant.

When the doorbell rang, Harry went. I wasn't surprised to see a policeman, but I was

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surprised to see how young he was—just a boy, really. Right behind him was Bertie, looking like he was on his way to a funeral.

"Sorry, officer," said Harry in a whisper. "We'll keep it down, I promise."

The officer looked around at all the money, then he looked right at me. "Mrs. Klemper?" he said, sounding sorry as hell.

I didn't say anything but I went over and stood next to Harry.

"Mrs. Klemper, I'm afraid I'm going to have to arrest you."

Harry looked at me and laughed out loud. Then he noticed I wasn't laughing, and neither was the officer. Bertie looked like a man who had to make a choice between shooting his mother and shooting his dog.

"What *is* this?" said Harry, half to me and half to them.

"Seems your wife robbed Heskett's tonight, Mr. Kemper," the cop told him.

"Sorry, Tillie," said Bertie. "But I had to tell them. Especially after Judy said you tried to get money out of the cigar box this afternoon. Besides, you left your purse behind."

Harry looked at me as if he'd never seen me before—and didn't much care if he ever did again, either.

"We found your fingerprints all over the safe," said the cop. "I'm afraid there's no way around it. I'll have to read you your rights."

Harry suddenly slapped his knee and told the cop it had to be a joke. And a good one at that, he had to admit. He wanted to know who put them up to it, Tupperman?

The policeman tugged at the bill of his cap and shifted to his other foot. "I'm afraid sixteen thousand dollars is nothing to joke about, Mr. Klemper."

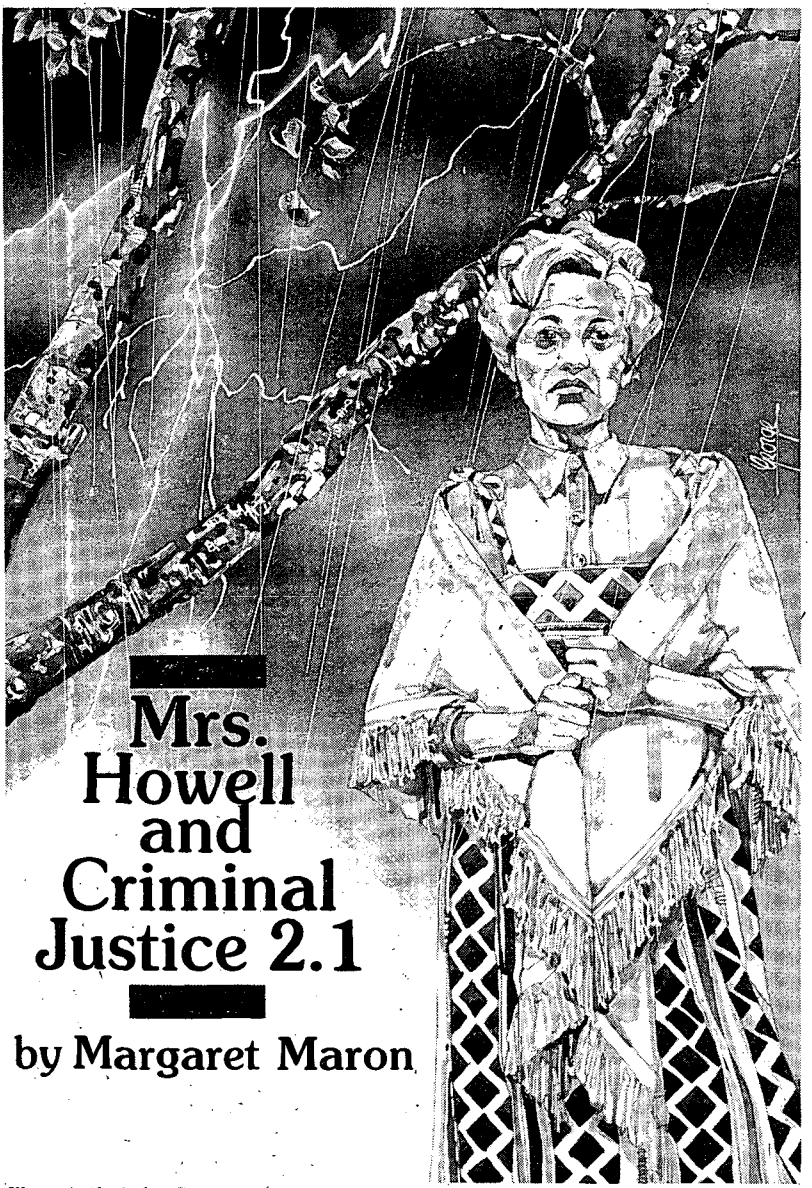
"Closer to seventeen," piped Bertie.

Harry backed slowly down to a chair. "There must be some mistake," he said.

"Yes," I said. "There must be."

So here I am at the police station, sitting alone on a bench while the boy fills out his papers and Harry tries to talk them out of bail so he can spend his three hundred dollars. As for me, I'm not worrying about a thing, and I probably never will again. Because if I've learned anything from all this, it's this: in real life things are going to happen you never even dreamed of worrying about, and that's a fact.

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Mrs. Howell and Criminal Justice 2.1

by Margaret Maron

Illustration by Arthur George

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Jeff Dixon watched with jaundiced eyes the dozen or so students drifting into his classroom. After three years, he could almost predict why each person had signed up for this summer course in criminal justice.

Take that clean-shaven young man in off-duty chinos and Izod shirt, for instance. He was probably capital police, bucking for plainclothes; an associate degree from Colleton County Technical College would almost cinch it.

Dixon was privately amused to note that he already had the textbook. Some of the guys never bothered; thought they could get through the course on sheer machismo. Like the blond kid strutting through the door now, his tie loosened, the top button of his blue uniform undone, and, even though he wore a wedding ring, already coming on strong to a couple of very pretty women ahead of him.

Dixon shuffled through the enrollment cards. They must be the pair of SBI clerks from the ID lab outside the capital. Those two stocky black guys behind them he remembered from previous classes. CCBI. (Like the uniformed police departments, both the State and City-County Bureaus of Investigation gave their people time off from work for classes that would upgrade their ratings.)

"Excuse me, please?"

Hovering in the doorway was a well-dressed, slightly plump woman with smart gray hair and inquisitive green eyes. Probably looking for Needlecraft on the next floor, thought Dixon. Colleton Tech drew a lot of older women who took up new hobbies when their children left home.

"Criminalistics?" chirped the woman.

Nonplussed, Dixon nodded.

"Oh, good!" She clicked into the room on thin high heels and took a desk near the two SBI women.

Several nondescript males wandered in. Lower echelon patrolmen from some of the surrounding small towns, no doubt; encouraged to attend by their sergeants, but more motivated by VA stipends.

Last through the doorway was a thin, freckled woman in full summer uniform. A sleeve of her crisp blue shirt carried the identifying patch of the Lockton police department.

Lockton was a bedroom suburb, and he'd heard about Officer Janet Jones from the captain there. The only woman in a twenty-man department, Jones was a divorcée, mid-thirties, who had talked her way onto the force after several years with the county rescue squad. She had a reputation for competence and hard work, and the

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captain was pushing her to advance.

The bell rang, and Dixon called the roll. The older woman's enrollment card carried a social security number and a name, Mrs. Marie Howell, but nothing to indicate why she was there.

As usual, Dixon began with a quick description of the course. "Welcome to Criminal Justice 2.1," he said. "Better known as Criminalistics I. We cover the fundamentals of investigation in this course—crime scene search, recording, collection and preservation of evidence, with investigation of specific offenses such as arson, narcotics, sex crimes, larceny, burglary, robbery, and homicide. The main thing I'll be stressing is the importance of common sense, thoroughness, and teamwork."

"If we're gonna form teams," said Blair, the blond hotshot, "I wanna be on her team." He leered at Sue Lee, the prettier of the two SBI women.

There was a snicker from some of the men in the rear, and the three professional women in the room exchanged here-we-go-again looks, but Mrs. Howell smiled at Blair as if she hadn't quite understood his remark.

Dixon brought them to order and continued his introductory lecture. Everyone began taking notes except Blair, who not only lacked notepaper, but had somehow lost his pen. Mrs. Howell lent him both.

By the end of the three-hour class session, Dixon had seen most of his first impressions confirmed. The discussion period brought intelligent comments from the SBI women, who were experienced in identifying partial fingerprints; thoughtful questions from the capital police officer and Janet Jones about why detectives took certain actions; and a running stream of smart-aleck remarks from Blair. Only Mrs. Howell had contributed nothing; and as class ended amid general conversation, Dixon said, "Mrs. Howell?"

She paused with a bright smile. "Yes?"

He held out her enrollment card. "There's a space here for noting if you're connected with a law agency. Yours is blank."

"Oh, I'm not anything official," she said. "Heavens, no! Do I have to be?"

"Not really, but I wondered . . ."

"Why I'm here?" Mrs. Howell looked self-conscious. "I thought it was a writing class."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've always loved to write," she said shyly. "I write poems. Not very good ones, I'm afraid. And poetry's not very popular unless you're Robert Frost or

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Rod McKuen or somebody. Then I noticed that there are lots of mystery books on the newsstands and I thought they might be easy to write, only I don't know a thing about guns or poisons; so when I saw Criminalistics in the catalog, I hoped it meant the technical parts of crime-writing. Well, I see now that it didn't, but it sounds awfully fascinating and I hope you don't mind if I stay."

Dixon suppressed a smile. "Not at all," he said.

In the weeks that followed, Dixon was rather pleased with the way the class shaped. The women were more conscientious about assignments, and they plunged into experimental crime scene searches with so much enthusiasm that pride spurred the men into keeping up. Blair became the class kvetch, grumbling about tests and papers. He was the only one to pass out at the autopsy they attended. "Try to pretend he's just cutting up a chicken," Mrs. Howell advised.

Mrs. Howell brought a distinctly domestic touch to the course. Despite some elementary consciousness-raising from the younger women, she persisted in calling herself "just a housewife" and in seeing things in that light.

When they mixed plaster of Paris to cast shoe tracks, she likened it to making cream waffles. "Mr. Howell's terribly fussy about his waffles. Cook never gets them right so I always have to do it, and this is the exact consistency of my batter."

She was enchanted to learn of the chemicals available to crime labs: chemicals that could lift a gun's filed-off serial numbers, that would react with microscopic traces of blood, that could develop fingerprints several years old.

Janet Jones took her under her wing, explained police procedures and terminology, and let the older woman examine the handcuffs and gun she wore on her belt.

Mrs. Howell reciprocated with home-baked cookies; and during coffee breaks in the canteen, she tried out arcane plot devices on her classmates and pretended not to mind when they picked flaws in her motives and methods.

"Black widow spiders aren't all that deadly," one of the CCBI guys told her. "And even if they were, putting some in a man's bed wouldn't necessarily do the trick. He'd probably roll over and crush them before they bit."

"Then what about a rich woman who can't sleep because it's a scorching hot night and the air conditioner is broken," Mrs. Howell postulated. "She

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goes out to the car, cranks it up, switches on the air conditioner, and goes to sleep in the back seat. Her husband sneaks out, closes the garage door and stuffs rags in the exhaust pipe so that she dies of carbon monoxide poisoning."

"There would be smudges on the tailpipe," said the policeman from the capital.

"Maybe if he'd just replaced the exhaust system?" she asked hopefully.

"That'd make him the number one suspect. He'd be accused of premeditated tampering."

When Dixon discussed paraffin tests to determine whether someone had recently fired a gun, she was excited to hear that handling bologna would give an inconclusive reading.

"So a killer could conceal a gun in his lunchbox, shoot the victim, and then eat a bologna sandwich! Mr. Howell loves bologna," she confided. "He says people wouldn't be so snooty about it if it cost as much as roast beef. We have it for lunch all the time. It doesn't quite agree with me and Mr. Howell's really not supposed to have so much smoked meat, but you know husbands. They love to have their way."

She said it without the least trace of irony or resentment. Sue Lee sighed and once again began to explain some of the basic gains that women—even "just housewives"—had made in the last twenty years.

Dixon tried to be patient; but one day, after listening to yet another zany murder plot in the canteen when he really wanted to talk to Janet Jones, he couldn't resist expounding the cold hard facts of life to his naive student.

"It's not *Columbo* or *Kojak* and half the time it isn't even *Hill Street Blues,*" he said, ignoring Janet's frown. "Read the textbook, Mrs. Howell. There's only a seventy-three percent clearance rate on homicide, and it wouldn't be that high except that most murders are domestic and the killers don't even try to deny it. More murders go unsolved because of dumb, lazy detectives than because of smart killers."

Mrs. Howell's face fell, and Janet Jones glared at him. To take the sting from his words, he grinned at them both. "Look," he said, "go ahead with your plots. They'll make good reading; but just remember that in real life, there are more Blairs around a station house than Kojaks."

Mrs. Howell smiled back gamely. "The KISS system you tell us to follow—Keep It Simple, Stupid?"

"Oh now, I didn't mean—"

"No, you're probably right. I suppose it *is* stupid for a fifty-

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year-old housewife to try to write anything."

Blinking back tears, Mrs. Howell fled from the canteen and left Dixon alone at the table with a seething Janet Jones.

"You probably kick cats, too," she said fiercely.

"I didn't mean to hurt her feelings," Dixon said. "Look, Bob Reed told me you were his most level-headed officer. Doesn't that nonsense she spouts get under your skin?"

"She's a neat lady doing what she has to to get by," said Janet, her blue eyes snapping.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Forget it," she said and crushed her foam cup into a ball. "You wouldn't understand."

She strode from the canteen, and Dixon sprinted after her.

"That sounded suspiciously like a chauvinistic remark, Officer Jones."

The policewoman paused. "Yes," she admitted.

"Chauvinistic, male-directed anger with a feeling of sisterhood toward Mrs. Howell," Dixon said thoughtfully. "Does her husband beat her or run around on her?"

"Captain Reed said you were good," said Janet Jones, impressed in spite of herself. "Mr. Howell owns Lockton's second-largest bank, so I know his car."

"And?"

"It's parked at a motel out on the bypass several times a week. The woman's one of his tellers."

"Does Mrs. Howell know?"

"I don't think so. Anyhow, you've heard her. She's so pre-ERA she'd probably think it was her fault. He's the reason she's here, though. He told her she writes rotten poetry, and she wanted to impress him with something better. Now you've shot her down, too."

"I'm sorry about that. Look, if I tell Mrs. Howell I think her luminol and Clorox plot has possibilities, will you have dinner with me tonight?"

Janet Jones smiled and a small dimple appeared in each freckled cheek. "What else did Captain Reed tell you?" she temporized.

"That you're brilliant and beautiful and that if he weren't happily married, he'd ask you out himself except that you're too sensible to see anyone in the department. What did he say about me?"

Her smile became a laugh, and her blue eyes danced impishly.

"That you were the best investigator the SBI ever had, that you went into teaching because you were so exasperated with the level of incompetence on most police forces, that you'd probably ask me to dinner, and that I should say yes."

"A good officer never ques-

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tions her captain's judgment," Dixon said.

"Okay, but you have to give Marie some encouragement."

They returned to the classroom, but Mrs. Howell had not come back after the coffee break. "Next time," Dixon promised.

Unfortunately, there was no next time for Mrs. Howell.

Classes were cancelled for a week when a severe wind and lightning storm hit the area, uprooting trees and knocking out power lines. Some parts of the county were without electricity for two days.

Like others in her department, Janet Jones had worked double shifts, directing traffic around fallen power lines, assisting in medical emergencies, and patrolling business areas where store windows had been broken by flying debris.

There were still dark circles under her eyes when the class finally met again. Everyone had tales of damage the summer storm had wrought, and it was several minutes before Dixon could call the class to order. Even then, Janet interrupted him. "Did anybody hear about Marie Howell?"

The others looked around, suddenly realizing that Mrs. Howell was missing. "Was she hurt?" someone asked.

"Not her; her husband," said Janet. "A fallen limb broke one of their storm doors—left glass all over their brick patio. He was picking up the pieces when he slipped on some wet leaves and fell on a jagged edge." Janet's fingers touched her neck. "Marie found him too late."

"He bled to death?" asked one of the SBI women, shocked.

Janet nodded. "The funeral was two days ago." She pulled out a sympathy card she had bought. "I thought we could send this to her as a class."

The card went around, and everyone signed it. Dixon added a note expressing their hope that she would soon rejoin them.

A few days later, a black-bordered envelope appeared in his mailbox at Colleton Tech. He showed it to Janet at dinner that night.

"Mrs. Howell isn't coming back," he said and handed her the letter.

> Dear Fellow Classmates and especially Mr. Dixon,
>
> Thank you so much for your sympathy upon my recent bereavement. You'll never know how much the class has meant to me and how much I learned. You are a good teacher, Mr. Dixon. Most of all, you helped me see that I have no talent for complicated murders. Poetry is my first and deepest love, and I shall not wander from my field again.

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Kind friends who helped,
I thank you so.
Sorrow's cares are gone
Since you I know.

Marie Howell

Janet's blue eyes were misty in the candlelight. "Poor dear," she said.

"'Poor dear,' my Aunt Fanny!" Dixon said. "Your department must have handled Howell's death. Are you sure it was an accident?"

"According to the autopsy report, he fell on a piece of glass and it pierced his jugular. Why?"

"Did anyone print the glass?"

"Of course we did, and it was just his fingerprints and hers."

"Hers?"

"She pulled it out of his neck. He was her husband, Jeff. She tried to save him. You can't possibly think—"

"Can't I? Read her letter again: how much the class meant, how much she learned! She's thumbing her nose at me. Look at that poem, dammit!"

Puzzled, Janet scanned the letter again. "Those are things people say at a time like this," she said helplessly. "You can't read double meanings into a thank-you note."

Her smile was rueful as she reread Marie Howell's poem. "I'm afraid her husband was right, though. She's certainly not a very good poet. 'Sorrow's cares are gone/Since you I know.' Awkward."

"Awkward but accurate," Dixon said. "Since knowing us, she's managed to get rid of a wealthy, cheating bully of a husband. I told her to keep it simple, and she did."

"Oh, honestly, Jeff! It's just bad poetry."

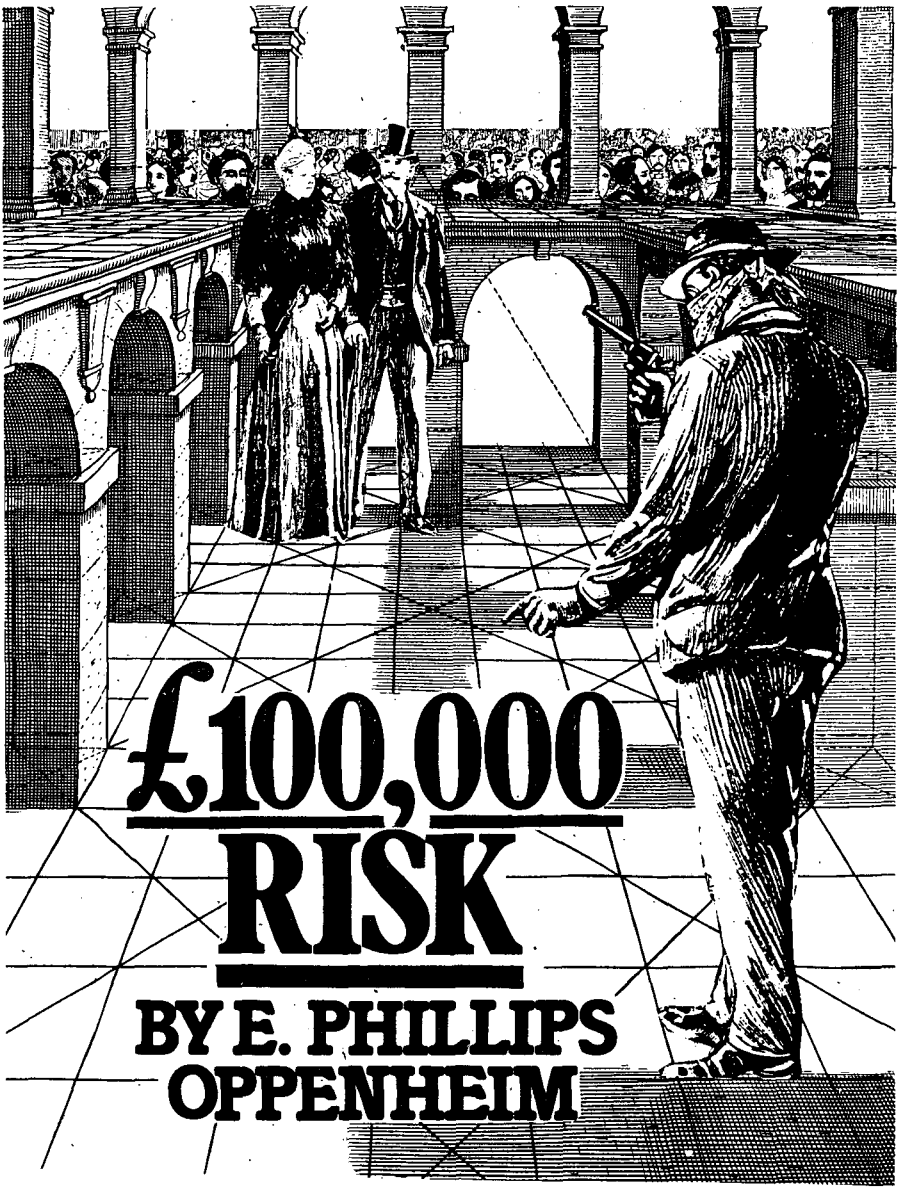
"But good acrostics," he said bitterly. "It wouldn't stand up in court, but read the first letter of each line, dear Janet, and tell me she shouldn't get an A in the course."

SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

Slim is guilty.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC



£100,000 RISK

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Illustration by Marc Yankus

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I have always felt a certain amount of self-satisfaction with my deportment during those few seconds of what was undoubtedly an unusual happening. Awakened suddenly from a light sleep either by a noise or by an uncomfortable feeling that someone was in the room, I touched the button above my head and flooded the room with light. Instantaneously I stretched out my hand towards the bell. When my fingers were within an inch or two of it, however, a voice, crisp and authoritative, from the foot of the bed addressed plain words to me.

"Leave the bell alone!"

I stiffened almost to rigidity. Lounging over the wooden end of my bedstead was the large sprawling figure of a strange man, his features concealed by a sinister-looking mask. The thing which I disliked most about the situation was a short, stubby but disagreeable-looking weapon held by perfectly steady fingers and pointing with deadly immobility at my head. I left the bell alone.

"What do you want with me?" I asked, dropping my hand upon the bedclothes.

"A moment or two's conversation."

"Conversations with a stranger who is wearing a mask and holding a gun do not very much appeal to me," I said.

"There are worse things," was the even response.

"The conversation not being of my seeking I suggest that you begin it."

"I have always been told," was the amiably spoken reply, "that the reason for your success as a man of adventures has been your common sense. You are displaying it at the present moment. Perhaps you will commence by telling me why you have chosen to go to bed at this unusual hour."

"It is not an unusual hour for me. If I have no engagements I am as often as not asleep before eleven o'clock."

"A pity," he remarked.

"Why?"

"Because you will have to get up again."

All this time I was trying to make up my mind what sort of a man this was who had found his way into my room, but except that he was wearing a dinner jacket, that his voice had quality, and that the eyes through the two slits of the mask were obviously those of a man of action, I could glean nothing from my observation. There was nothing about him in the least familiar. I sat a little higher up in the bed, unpleasantly conscious that even my slight movement had resulted in a corresponding change of position of that ugly pointing weapon.

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"I don't mind getting up, particularly," I told him, "but I should do so with more enthusiasm if I had any idea as to why I was getting up."

"You have forgotten," the voice from the end of the bed said reproachfully, "that tonight is the reception of the Princess Bennaro de Fantany."

"You are in error. I had not forgotten it, but I had simply decided not to go. How on earth did you know that I was invited?"

Something that sounded like a sigh escaped through the narrow slit in the mask where the lips should have been.

"These things get about," he remarked. "You will need your tails and full evening kit. Decorations being optional, you need not bother about them."

I looked steadily at that weapon.

"May I ask," I ventured, "if some sort of a parole is possible? I have no particular objection to leaving my bed—in fact it would be rather a relief—but I should be exceedingly uncomfortable dressing with the end of that gun a few feet away from me all the time. For instance, when I put on my trousers—"

"Have no fear," my visitor interrupted. "I will accept your parole to this extent: I will put away my weapon if you will promise to make no effort to communicate with anyone outside the room and will attire yourself for the evening to attend the reception."

I thought over the situation.

"You would not like," I suggested, "to give me some idea as to why you are adopting the position of director of my social movements? I had decided that for me the reception would be a very dull affair. I have few acquaintances amongst the *haut monde*."

"Your presence there is required," was the firm reply. "Are you willing to give your parole?"

"I suppose so," I answered a little sulkily.

The gun was lowered and disappeared altogether. My companion drew himself up to his full height. He was a very tall man, loosely but powerfully built, and as far as I could judge a complete stranger to me. I threw off the bedclothes, thrust my feet into my slippers, and confronted him.

"I shall require your word," he pronounced, "that you will not ring any bell, that you will not call anyone, that you will dress in the manner I said and join me in the next room as soon as you are ready."

I yawned and looked at my clock. It was as yet only twenty past ten.

"Very well," I agreed.

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"In that case," my visitor concluded, drawing away from the end of the bed and picking up a black overcoat and a silk hat from a chair, "I shall await you in your sitting room."

As near as I can remember I was about twenty minutes in completing my change from pajamas to evening clothes. I took a silk hat from my closet, hung a black overcoat upon my arm, turned the handle of the door of the adjoining apartment, and entered. I was confronted by a very bewildering surprise. My visitor, still wearing his black mask, was sitting straddle-legged upon the high-backed chair drawn up to the dining table. The easy chair was occupied by a woman whom I have always declared to be the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. She was young, she was elegantly dressed and her toilette was the toilette of a woman who was about to attend such a reception as the one to which I was bidden. Her hair, beautifully coiffured, was of the color of fine spun gold; her eyes were a little darker in shade; her complexion was faultless. If my first impressions in those few seconds were correct, there was not a touch of makeup of any sort about her. Her beautiful lips with their slightly voluptuous curve were untouched.

"Let me introduce you, major," the man upon the chair said with a courteous wave of the hand. "Major Lyson—my sister, Miss Henrietta."

I bowed to the young lady, who smiled pleasantly; then I glanced back at her *soi-disant* brother.

"Miss Henrietta?" I murmured questioningly.

"An embarrassing moment, I admit," was his calm reply. "I am anxious not to part just yet with my incognito. It might occur to you, major, with your almost superhuman intelligence, that my sister's name would probably be my own."

"The idea had occurred to me," I assented. "May I ask whether your sister is aware of the present situation?"

"I know something about it," she admitted with a smile. "I can understand my brother's hesitation, Major Lyson. Would not your ignorance of my surname be atoned for by the obvious necessity of addressing me by the name you have heard? Only do not, if you please, as our acquaintance ripens, call me Hettie. It is an abbreviation which I detest."

"Am I to gather," I enquired, "that our acquaintance is likely to be prolonged?"

"For a matter of two or three hours," the man told me. "You are to have the honor, I hope I may add the pleasure, of being my sister's escort to the princess's reception tonight."

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I laid down my coat and hat.

"Is this a new game?" I asked. "Forgive me if I am a little behind the times but they tell me mad things are being done nowadays by people who are weary of the ordinary round of society functions."

"It is not a game at all," he replied. "It is a piece of very deadly reality."

"Then I am to take your sister to the princess's reception?"

"Precisely."

"Has she a card of invitation?"

My mysterious visitor sighed.

"For some time," he confessed, "the fact that she has no card has stood in our way. It is very important indeed that she should attend this reception, but as you know the princess is an exacting hostess with a strictly limited circle of friends. However, the difficulty has been overcome. She will enter upon your invitation."

I still considered that the young woman with the Victorian name was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen in my life, and even though I claim to be a little critical upon the minor points of some of the ladies whom one meets, I could not find a single fault in her toilette, her voice, or her bearing. Nevertheless, I shook my head.

"That is an absolute impossibility," I declared. "My card of invitation is distinctly made out in my name. It would be out of the question for me to introduce anyone to a gathering such as this, especially a stranger."

"But your card," he remarked, "permits you the privilege—"

"It does nothing of the sort," I interrupted. "My invitation card says 'Major Lyson.' I know a great many Bohemian parties are given nowadays where it is possible to take friends. This is not one of them. I could not venture to introduce even so charming a person as your sister to a woman who is reputed to be the greatest stickler for the proprieties in society, and with whom my own acquaintance is of the slightest."

"But your card," the other persisted, "permits you to take a lady."

"It does nothing of the sort," I repeated. "My own name is the only thing that appears upon it."

He rose slowly to his feet and made his way to the mirror over my mantelpiece, the frame of which I had followed the old fashioned custom of decorating with my various cards of invitation in the correct order of dates. He leaned forward and studied them until he came to the one which referred to that night's entertainment.

" 'The Princess Bennaro de Fantany requests the pleasure of the company of Major Lyson, D.S.O., M.C. and Miss Lyson—' " he be-

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gan.

"That is absurd," I interrupted. "The card is made out in my name only."

He tapped it with his fingernail.

"My sight," he murmured, "even through these slits is good."

"I'll bet you five pounds," I offered, "that no other name than that of Major Lyson appears on that card."

"I don't bet on certainties," was the confident reply. "Won't you look for yourself, major?"

I stood by his side upon the hearthrug. I looked at the card. I blinked and looked at it again. I adjusted my glass and stared at it. The "Miss Lyson" must have been subsequently added, but it was there beyond a doubt.

"That is not the card of invitation as I received it," I declared at last.

"My dear major," the man at my side remonstrated, "there are not two Major Lysons, are there? The card is correct in every detail. The 'Major Lyson' and 'Miss Lyson' are absolutely apparent. You have no excuse for refusing the simple request which I am making. You can carry the card with you in your pocket. Nowadays it is sometimes, I believe, asked that you do so. Your right to take my sister could never be questioned."

I took the card in my hand. There was no doubt that the addition was perfectly unrecognizable as such. I replaced it upon the chimneypiece.

"It is true," I acknowledged, "that I have a sister, but she lives in Devonshire and she never attends any such function as this. She has her own friends, but the princess is not one of them. She is not even in London."

"Is it worthwhile making such a fuss?" the other asked coldly. "It will be time for you to start in a few minutes."

"I posted my letter of regret an hour ago," I confided.

"But your first reply was an acceptance, without a doubt."

"How do you know that?"

"Surmise—sheer surmise. Listen," my visitor went on and for the first time there was a note of real seriousness in his voice. "It is of the greatest importance to my sister and myself that you attend this reception and that she does. I happen to know that unescorted women will be subject to the most careful and critical surveillance. In your company there will not be the slightest difficulty. And listen—she must be there."

"Why?" I demanded. "It is not a Royal command. It is an important party, I know, but there are several others during the

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season which rank with it. Why should your sister's presence at this one be of such importance?"

There was a moment's silence in the room. The after-theater traffic in the Strand was commencing, and the honking of horns from the motor vehicles of every description was beginning. I closed the window; then I came back and faced my problem.

"Look here," I said. "You want me to take your sister to this party. Why have you come here and threatened me with my life in this melodramatic fashion if I do not agree to being her escort? You behave as though it were a matter of life and death that your sister should be there and that I am the only man who can take her. Why?"

"It is a matter of life or death," the man said quietly. "Your life or your death, Lyson. That is the long and short of it."

Again there was a brief silence. The girl said nothing. I began to realize that however astounding it might seem, the speaker was really in earnest.

"I had an idea, major," he went on, "that you were too much of a man of the world to make a fuss about a trifle like this. You have been in tight corners before—I have heard of some of them. You are in one now. You can evade all trouble by granting my simple request. Do that and I will make you a present of my revolver and throw my mask into the flames. If you are going to be stubborn, my sister will take the card and she will go to the reception. If there is any question she will say that she missed her brother coming in, that he will be there in a moment, and she will pass on into the crowd. With that card there will be nothing to stop her."

"And what should I be doing?"

"You would not be in a position to do anything."

"Do you mean that you would commit murder because I refused?" I demanded incredulously.

"You will oblige me very much by not asking that question, sir."

The girl rose to her feet and came suddenly to where we were standing face to face. She laid her fingers upon my arm.

"Major Lyson," she pleaded. "Take me to the reception, please. I will be no trouble; I will bring no shadow of disgrace upon you; I will do my best to be an agreeable companion. When the time has passed and you know all about it we may still be good friends and you will laugh with me at the memory. My brother is too ridiculously in earnest, but it is a vital matter, after all. Take me to the party, please."

I looked from one to the other.

"Look here," I cried, "what is to prevent my leaving your sister

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at any moment in the proceedings?"

"It is a thing which you could not do, major. If you agree to take my sister to the party you will do it."

Probably that was where he won. I picked up my hat and coat.

"I'll ring for a taxi," I said.

"There is no necessity," the man replied. "The car is at the door. For the rest I keep my word."

He opened the drawer of my chiffonier and threw the revolver into it. He tore the mask from his face. It was the face of a stranger, a good-looking enough fellow, if a trifle undistinguished.

"Coming our way?" I asked as I opened the door of the apartment for his sister.

"Thank you, no," he said. "I'll take a taxi from the Court."

My unknown visitor descended in the lift with us and himself fetched the automobile, which turned out to be a hired Daimler. He stood for a moment on the pavement bareheaded as we drove off. My companion leaned back in the corner.

"Episode number one is now concluded," she observed. "I think Malcolm was quite good in his part, don't you? I wonder if I shall be as successful."

"So Malcolm is your brother's Christian name," I remarked.

She nodded.

"A very nice one, too, I think. Major Lyson, I am terrified to death."

"Not half so terrified as I am," I assured her. "Are we really going to Doncaster House?"

"We certainly are."

"And afterwards? Shall we dance, sup, and all the rest of it?"

"Afterwards lies in the lap of the gods," she sighed. "After we have passed through the reception rooms and we have greeted our hostess, your actual responsibilities will have ended. Mine will begin, although I warn you that I may still need your help."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I don't like these big shows as a rule but this one has commenced in such an unusual fashion that I was beginning to hope—"

"Well?"

"That it might go on being unusual."

"Perhaps it will."

"You will dance with me, I hope?"

"Probably."

"And what about supper? I cannot be dragged from my bed at this hour of the night for nothing."

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"Is my society nothing?"

"Everything in the world," I assured her, "if you will only enter heart and soul into it."

She sighed.

"Shouldn't I love to! Anyway, I shall keep you with me as long as I dare."

I suddenly felt her fingers in mine. At first it gave me a start; then I realized that it was purely an instinctive gesture. She was afraid.

"Do I look like a brave woman?" she continued.

"You have courage, I'm sure," I told her.

"I thought so. Now I am afraid. You do not mind my holding your hand? You seem so—do you mind if I say it?—level-headed, so determined in everything you do. You are not in the least like my irresponsible brother."

"Am I not? I rather fancied he was a pretty determined person," I remarked with a little grimace. "I shan't easily forget waking up and looking down the yawning muzzle of his beastly revolver."

"Thank God he didn't use it," she murmured.

"You wouldn't have had my hand to hold, would you?"

She shivered and held it a little tighter.

"Do not take any notice of what I do or say, please, in these few minutes," she begged, leaning slightly towards me. "Please kiss me."

I obeyed at once. She let her head rest for a moment or so upon my shoulder. Somehow or other she seemed to grow more composed.

"You are very nice, Major Lyson," she whispered. "Are you married?"

"Not till next year," I told her.

"I have heard of you once or twice, seen you at the Milan now and then. You are fond of adventures, aren't you?"

"Well, I seem to tumble into them somehow," I admitted. "I wouldn't mind if they all ended like this one."

She laughed softly. She was becoming quite herself again.

"This one may not be over yet," she warned me.

"I hope not," I said.

She drew away with another queer little laugh. She pointed to the window.

"Our destination," she murmured.

The reception of the Princess Bennaro de Fantany was a very magnificent affair, but it differed in no degree from the many similar entertainments given during the season. Our hostess

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greeted us with a charming smile and accepted the presence of my hypothetical sister with the most complete equanimity. We passed into the crowd, regaled ourselves with champagne cocktails, danced twice, and were preparing to do so the third time when my companion, with a glance at her wristwatch, led me firmly away from the ballroom.

"Major Lyson," she confided, "the serious business of the evening is at hand."

"I have not come here for serious business," I replied.

"You may not realize it but you have," she assured me. "Will you please come this way."

Her fingers were upon my coat sleeve. I had no alternative but to obey. I followed her along what appeared to be interminable corridors and up one flight of stairs. We ended up in a rather dimly lit part of the enormous house. Opposite us in the passage where she brought me to a halt was the shaft of a small lift.

"How on earth," I asked, "do you happen to know your way about this house so perfectly?"

"I lived here once before the princess leased it," she replied, glancing again at her wristwatch. "No more questions, please. I'll tell you what you have to do in a minute."

She was a little breathless. It seemed to me that her whole attention was concentrated upon the lift.

"Supper," she told me, "as I suppose you know, is being served on the roof garden. This is the private lift used by the princess and anyone of her immediate household. Tonight she is leading the way up by the main lift and staircase."

"Then who is coming up here?" I asked.

"Two other persons only—unless they change their minds."

"And they?"

"A young man and Mrs. Stanley Flower."

"Heavens!" I exclaimed. "And what are we to do with them?"

Once more the girl glanced at her wristwatch. Listening intently, it seemed to me that the music had ceased below but was beginning again on the roof, and that the great volume of sound now rising was that of human voices.

"Mrs. Stanley Flower," I continued, "is the woman who wears a million pounds' worth of jewels."

"You know as much as that, do you?" my companion said feverishly. "Well, anyhow you are well informed. I think the woman ought to be stripped of all of them and locked up."

"Why?"

The Babel of voices below was decreasing.

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"Because, especially in these days of adventure and poverty," she answered passionately, "no one has the right to offer such a temptation. She wears only diamonds. Think how easily they are disposed of, think how many poor men there must be in the world, men of her own social station and higher to whom a tenth part of the value of those jewels would be heaven!"

I had conceived many ideas of the end of my adventure, but I must confess that a jewel robbery had never entered into my mind.

"Is anyone going to try and steal Mrs. Stanley Flower's jewels tonight?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are we concerned in the theft? Is that why we are loitering about here in an unexplored part of the house and listening?"

"Yes."

I should have been furiously angry but for that quaint yet fascinating sensation of adventure which seemed to have taken hold of me. Besides, my companion was so thrillingly beautiful! I found myself, like her, leaning forward, listening for the sound of the lift. Nevertheless, I kept my senses to some extent.

"Which side of the fence are we?" I demanded. "Are you trying to make a super-detective of me or a super-thief?"

Suddenly down below we heard the clanging of an iron gate. Almost immediately the lift bell rang twice. The girl grabbed my arm and drew me on one side.

"You may know in a few seconds," she whispered. "Listen, the lift is coming up. If it stops here act according to your impulse. If it passes up, nothing is going to happen. Just a chance, a ten-to-one chance, major. If it stops here—"

She probably miscalculated the time that it took to reach our floor. Before she had finished her sentence there was a click, and the lift stopped level with us. For a moment no one appeared. I stepped forward. Very cautiously, with wild, terrified eyes, a young man dressed in a magnificent foreign uniform, his breast covered with medals and decorations, pushed open the gate and stepped out. He saw me standing there and he was speechless. So was I. There was a smashed bottle upon the floor of the lift, an overpowering odor of anaesthetic, and a woman lying doubled up as though she had slipped from the seat—a woman with bare neck and arms, ghastly pale, her eyes closed, her fingers clutching at the air—a woman without a doubt suffering from some sudden and violently applied narcotic. I stood face to face with her escort a foot or so away from the fumes which were escaping from that broken bottle—fumes which were beginning to stupefy me and were, I

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could see, having a ghastly effect upon him.

"What's wrong?" I demanded. "Don't try to pass me. I must know first what has happened."

"A damn silly business," the man gasped. "Badly managed, badly thought out. Rotten stuff that—my God!"

He swayed on his feet and I saw the projections from his pocket.

"Give me the jewels!" I ordered.

For one moment he seemed as though courage had flared up within him. He made a spring forward, but I caught him and swung him round. He was, after all, only a youth. I gripped him by the throat and emptied his pockets. Such diamonds as I had never seen before in my life streamed through my fingers. There was still no one in sight, there was still the increasing roar of voices as people ascended by the lifts and staircases on the other side of the mansion to the roof garden. Then the girl caught hold of my shoulders and plucked ineffectually at the arm which held the young man.

"Do as I tell you!" she begged.

I turned my head away from the poisonous fumes.

"Throw the diamonds back into the lift," she said.

"Take them out of my pockets yourself," I directed, retaining my clutch.

She emptied my pockets and threw the jewels in a glittering shower onto the half-unconscious woman.

"Now let him go!" the girl cried.

I looked at her stupefied.

"The fellow nearly committed murder," I protested. "God knows when that woman will recover her senses—if ever she does."

"Let him go," she repeated.

I relaxed my grasp of him. After all, it was not my affair. He staggered away. We saw him open a door a few yards down the corridor and disappear. The girl leaned forward and looked into the lift.

"Are all the jewels there?" she asked.

"I believe so," I answered. "All that were in his pockets are there."

She slammed the gate and gripped at my arm.

"Come!" she ordered.

The lift, with the closing of the gate, glided upwards, the carpeted floor strewn with jewels, the woman lying there unconscious. My companion led me away. We passed along passages and up stairways until we came in sight of the seething mob of guests crowding into the roof garden. She handed me a bottle of perfume.

"Never mind—swamp yourself in it," she said. "Rub your hands

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and your forehead and your hair. There are toilette rooms on your left. I go to the right. One minute—that's all you can have."

"There was no one in the toilette room. I obeyed orders. I plunged my head first into cold water, then used the perfume freely. I found her waiting for me. She passed her arm through mine.

"That was the princess's private lift," she said, looking backwards. "Now we have to make our way along this corridor."

"Why?" I asked.

"We are going to have supper."

It was perhaps a tame ending. It was what happened, anyway. We drank champagne—as much champagne as ever I remember drinking before at a sitting. We ate delicious food and we watched the electric thrill which in a few minutes seemed to pass around the room, listened to the hubbub of voices which brought people's heads together, which set everyone talking loudly. We heard fragments of many disconnected phrases and announcements.

"His Majesty the King of Morania and Mrs. Stanley Flower have been attacked while entering the lift," a young man shouted to some friends at a neighboring table.

"The whole of Mrs. Stanley Flower's jewels have been stolen!"

"The king has been killed, they say, fighting with the thieves," came from another breathless entrant of the room.

"Rubbish! The whole of the jewels were lying about in the lift and have been recovered," the latest arrival reported to some friends a few yards away.

I had eaten and drunk, I smelt like a scent factory, but I was feeling a man again.

"Do you mind telling me your idea of what has happened?" I asked Henrietta.

She patted my hand, leaned across to me, and dropped her voice.

"You were marvellous," she whispered. "Listen. I was once a governess in this house. I know every inch of it. The man whom you thought was the King of Morania was an imposter. Never mind. Don't ask me any questions as to who he was or how I got to know about what was going to happen. Malcolm—you remember Malcolm?"

"Do I?" I asked feebly.

"Silly! Malcolm is my elder brother who frightened you into coming here with me tonight. He is one of Lloyds' underwriters—only started business three weeks ago. They took one hundred thousand pounds' risk on the insurance of Mrs. Stanley Flower's jewels. If they had been stolen his firm would have been bankrupt."

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"Well, they were not stolen," I ventured. "Don't you hear everyone saying so?"

She held my hand for a moment shamelessly.

"Thanks to you, my dear friend," she said, and her eyes were more wonderful than ever.

"But why?" I asked. "Why come to me? What made your brother pay me that extraordinary visit? Why did he pack me off here with you? Why the mischief, if you knew anything about it, didn't you go to Scotland Yard?"

She waited until the sommelier at our table had filled our glasses, she even sent the waiter away for more chicken pie. All the time she was listening intently to the murmur of talk around. Presently she leaned forward.

"Dear Major Lyson," she began. "Charles Lyson, isn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Well, dear Charles, then. I have two brothers. One is good—Malcolm—and he has been saved from ruin. One is bad and he was a secretary in this house and our hostess's great favorite for years. He is the bad brother. Do not ask me how we got to know at the last moment what was going to happen. I cannot tell you that. The dénouement you saw. Look across the room."

I obeyed, and there, to my surprise, I saw a young man in a magnificent uniform and many medals, a young man whom I would have sworn that I had held by the throat a few minutes before, sitting between his hostess and a rather pale but still very much alive Mrs. Stanley Flower.

"You see, Guy has the misfortune to resemble one of our continental royalties. You hear what everyone is saying, though. The imposter got away and at the princess's and Mrs. Stanley Flower's urgent wish the affair is to be hushed up. That leaves us all happy, doesn't it?"

Her eyes were pleading with mine, her fingers were still resting upon my hand. I reflected that I had not a shadow of tangible evidence against anyone. Henrietta was, as I have said in the beginning, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. The memory of that brief embrace in the car was still with me.

"If you say so," I answered.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Photo by Jerold Dukor

ARTHUR MALING

To poets, April means spring flowers, romance, heartsong, et cetera. To the rest of us, it's probably most notable for taxes. It will take more than a few budding crocuses to cheer up most of us this month. With that in mind, I'm recommending an original, contemporary mystery series, full of fine characters and loaded with action. Arthur Maling's "Brock Potter" books should go a long way toward taking your mind off your money—and taking the sting out of April 15th.

The Brock Potter books are appropriate for another reason: their background is also money. Brockton Potter is a stock analyst on Wall Street, a partner in the firm of Price, Potter and Petacque. Potter, a self-made, comfortably wealthy businessman, can afford to live in a renovated brownstone on a pleasant street in Greenwich Village. In the course of his work, however, he spends much of his time in the mansions, boardrooms, private planes, and watering holes of those who wield great corporate power, or oversee inherited fortunes.

I don't imagine that the average stock analyst's job is nearly as exciting and dangerous as Potter's. Potter is a maverick, a man of unquenchable curiosity, dogged determination, and quick reflexes. Price, Potter and Petacque is a brokerage firm that sells stocks and bonds to large purchasers like banks. Their client list is small but very elite; and Pot-

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ter's job is to make enlightened recommendations about the market. He accomplishes this by supervising the activities of his small but select research department—each member a separate personality and a specialist in a certain field or industry—and by traveling, cementing relationships with his personal contacts in the business world, and introducing himself to newcomers in the field. Potter has strong instincts and a keen, investigative mind, and his weekly newsletter of stock tips is one of the major reasons the firm's client list is so prestigious.

Brock is supported in the book by a strong cast of subsidiary players. Tom Petacque, one of Brock's partners, is an old friend, and Brock is also close to his lovely wife and small son. Mark Price, the other partner, is a millionaire who worries about extravagance. Tom is the firm's salesman, while Mark acts as office manager.Brock's investigations of an alleged insurance scam, or the murder of an old lady who holds a handful of apparently worthless stock, or even an international industrial spy ring—all threaten the life of Price, Potter and Petacque, as well as his own. Because the reader becomes attached to the folks at P, P and P, this adds an extra element of tension.

Brock Potter's a bachelor, an art collector, a decent man with a mind like quicksilver. His long-time girlfriend, Carol, is a series character, as are the company's employees and colleagues. And for added spice, there's always Philip Quick, the hardworking and unconventional Chicago private eye whom Potter often consults. Each novel develops one or more of the old familiar characters in depth, as well as introducing a new batch of villains and suspects.

Harper and Row published *Ripoff* in 1976, following up with *Schroeder's Game, Lucky Devil*, and *The Koberg Link. A Taste of Treason*, Arthur Maling's thirteenth novel and his fifth book in the Brock Potter series, was published in 1983. All are available from that publisher in paperback as well.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Michael Innes has a new mystery with a double treat. **Appleby and Honeybath** (Dodd, Mead, $13.95, 198 pp.) unites two protagonists who usually solo in their own series: Appleby, the retired Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and Honeybath, well-known portrait painter. The setting is a monstrous old English country

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manor, and the two friends and sleuths must solve what appears to be a traditional locked-room mystery. Innes, as usual, writes with verve and style and wit. He's an original, and this new addition to his long list of mysteries simply adds to his well-deserved reputation.

Murder Among Friends by Frank McConnell is a breezy first novel set in Chicago. Its narrator is Harry Garnish, a young but tarnished private investigator at O'Toole Investigative Agency. The bane of his existence is Bridget O'Toole, a sixty-year-old ex-nun who left the convent when her brother suffered a severe stroke (thus bashing Harry's dreams of taking over the company). There's lots of humor here, but there are also murder, adultery, greed, and corruption. McConnell blends them all into a very entertaining tale, and I wouldn't be surprised if we see more of Harry and his mentor (or tormentor), Bridget. (Walker, $12.95, 186 pp.)

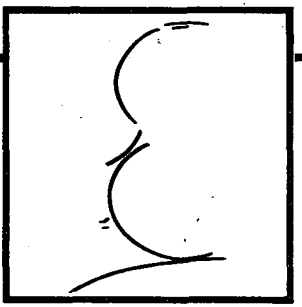
Bestselling author Fletcher Knebel nimbly guides the reader through the high-tech world of computers in **Poker Game** (Doubleday, $14.95, 257 pp.). Stated in its simplest terms, the novel concerns the theft of Katwar, a breakthrough design believed to be *the* security weapon against computer theft. But there's lots more here: side-trips to the bedrooms and boardrooms of those rare people who inhabit Silicon Valley; back-room, high-stakes poker games around the world; and even a horrible glimpse of the barbarities perpetrated by military regimes in South America. There are sex, suspense, and adventure galore, all laced with both espionage and esprit. Knebel has a sure hand at storytelling, and this one's irresistible.

Robert Barnard's another pro, and **The Case of the Missing Brontë** goes down smoothly. Scotland Yard's amiable Perry Trethowan makes another appearance in this book, set in a Yorkshire village near Trethowan's family manse. A local woman, a retired schoolmistress, invites herself to join Perry and his spunky wife Jan over a drink in the pub. The old woman confides that she's just inherited a roomful of old papers from a friend, and that she believes an original Brontë manuscript is among them. Perry advises her to consult an expert at a nearby university, and the woman thanks him for the suggestion. Being a Brontë fan, he returns to London with his curiosity whetted. So when the old woman is brutally attacked soon after—and the manuscript stolen—Perry's Scotland Yard chief is happy to send him to the spot to investigate, and he is glad to go. This clips along and is a lot of fun, and if you—like Perry—are a Brontë reader, you should find it especially enjoyable. (Charles Scribner's Sons, $11.95, 182 pp.)

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Gorky Park has all the elements of a highly satisfying mystery, and it nicely combines these with international intrigue. There has been a triple murder near an ice skating rink in Moscow. The city's chief detective, Arkady Renko, conducts a painstaking investigation that moves toward both the killer and the unthinkably dangerous conclusion that the fearsome KGB has somehow been involved. As in a Greek tragedy, the closer Renko comes to the truth, the closer he comes to his own death.

The corpses have had their faces removed, their eyes gouged out, their fingertips cut off, and in two cases their teeth shot out. This last mutilation proves to be a clue, for careful recovery of the fragments reveals a dental filling made in America. Inspector Renko goes by the book, a distinct pleasure for the aficionado of police procedure. Hair follicles, paint traces, ballistics analysis, and finally the technique of facial reconstruction practiced by an anthropologist all come into the picture.

As Inspector Renko, actor William Hurt correctly if uninspiringly plays a dogged, honest man condemned to operate within the Communist system's duplicity and intrigue. There are also two Americans: a rich businessman played with convincingly oily self assurance by Lee Marvin, and an Irish detective from New York. The businessman is smuggling live sables out of the country in order to break the fiercely guarded Russian monopoly on this the highest-priced of all furs. The detective is nosing around Moscow, rightly suspecting that his kid brother is one of the victims.

Finally there are the Moscow

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William Hurt, Lee Marvin, and Joanna Pacula in *Gorky Park*.

prosecutor who has guided Renko through his career but is now betraying him; and Irina, a dissident girl whose skates have been found on one of the bodies, and with whom Renko falls in love. No wonder. Joanna Pacula, the Polish actress who plays this role, combines the beauty of Jean Simmons with the natural sensuality of Jennifer Jones.

Add to these five main characters the usual complement of police personnel and friends and it becomes obvious that squeezing the over four hundred-page *Gorky Park* into a movie, even a long one such as this, is no easy proposition.

The reconstructor of human skulls, who in the novel's abundance of invention is a dwarf, becomes an ordinary character; Renko's unfaithful wife and her divorce proceeding are left out of the movie altogether. But the movie was evidently still running too long. And so, just at the point where the novel's complications grow rich and strange, the action is speeded up.

In the novel Renko is nearly killed. He drifts in a delirium through a long convalescence and a KGB ordeal of interrogation. He goes to New York, and we are treated to a Russian's first impressions of that exotic city, including its borough of Staten Island, where the smuggled sables are being kept. Each character's hidden depths are slowly revealed.

In contrast, the movie of *Gorky Park* barely suggests what makes its characters tick. Moreover, all the evolving plot complications are suddenly resolved with a trip to Sweden (New York never appears). In Sweden Inspector Renko, Lee Marvin, the girl, the sables, the New York detective, and the KGB all come together in a bloody shootout. In other words, the movie muddles through. But it leaves novelist Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park* a badly mutilated corpse.

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THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The November Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Robert Gray of Rutland, Vermont. Honorable mentions go to Victor T. Stella of Anaheim, California; M. Harrington of Claremont, California; Elliott McDonald of Bowesmont, North Dakota; Richard Kauffman of Mariposa, California; K. J. Franks of Wooster, Ohio; Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California; Donald W. Roddy of Olympia, Washington; John R. Walkinshaw of Pleasant Grove, Alabama; Roy E. Maynor of Baltimore, Maryland; So Keegan of Chicago, Illinois.

VOICES FROM BEYOND by Robert Gray

Madame Morgana's twilight seance group sat crosslegged in the city park. They formed a tight circle, hands joined, eyes closed, concentrating on the words of their medium.

"We have called forth the restless spirit of Sadie Feldstein," she whispered. "Please concentrate. She needs our help."

Everyone shut his eyes a little tighter. Morty Feldstein concentrated hardest of all. He knew his late wife would yell at him if he slacked off.

They could hear the wind blowing, but felt no hint of a breeze. It was scary. The chill that crept down Morty's spine was more than just the crisp autumn air. He heard a woman's voice. It seemed to be coming from a clearing nearby, but when he sneaked a peek, no one was there.

"Morrrty . . . Morrrty . . . Morrrty," called the voice, sounding as if it was being carried by the frightening breeze, that wind of death.

"Sadie?"

"Morty . . . Can you hear me?"

"Yes, dear," he replied, his voice cracking with fear.

The next sound wasn't spiritual, but distinctly temporal. Sadie uttered some extremely earthy cuss words and sounded like she was fighting off Satan himself. Then a new voice was heard. The wind had stopped.

"Madame Morgana? Sergeant Belden here. Bunco Squad. You'll see my partner coming into view any second by the light pole. He'll pick up the loudspeaker you planted in that pile of leaves. Then we'd like a word with you. The rest of you folks stick around, too. . . . This is Belden, signing off from the Hereafter."

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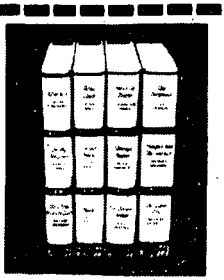
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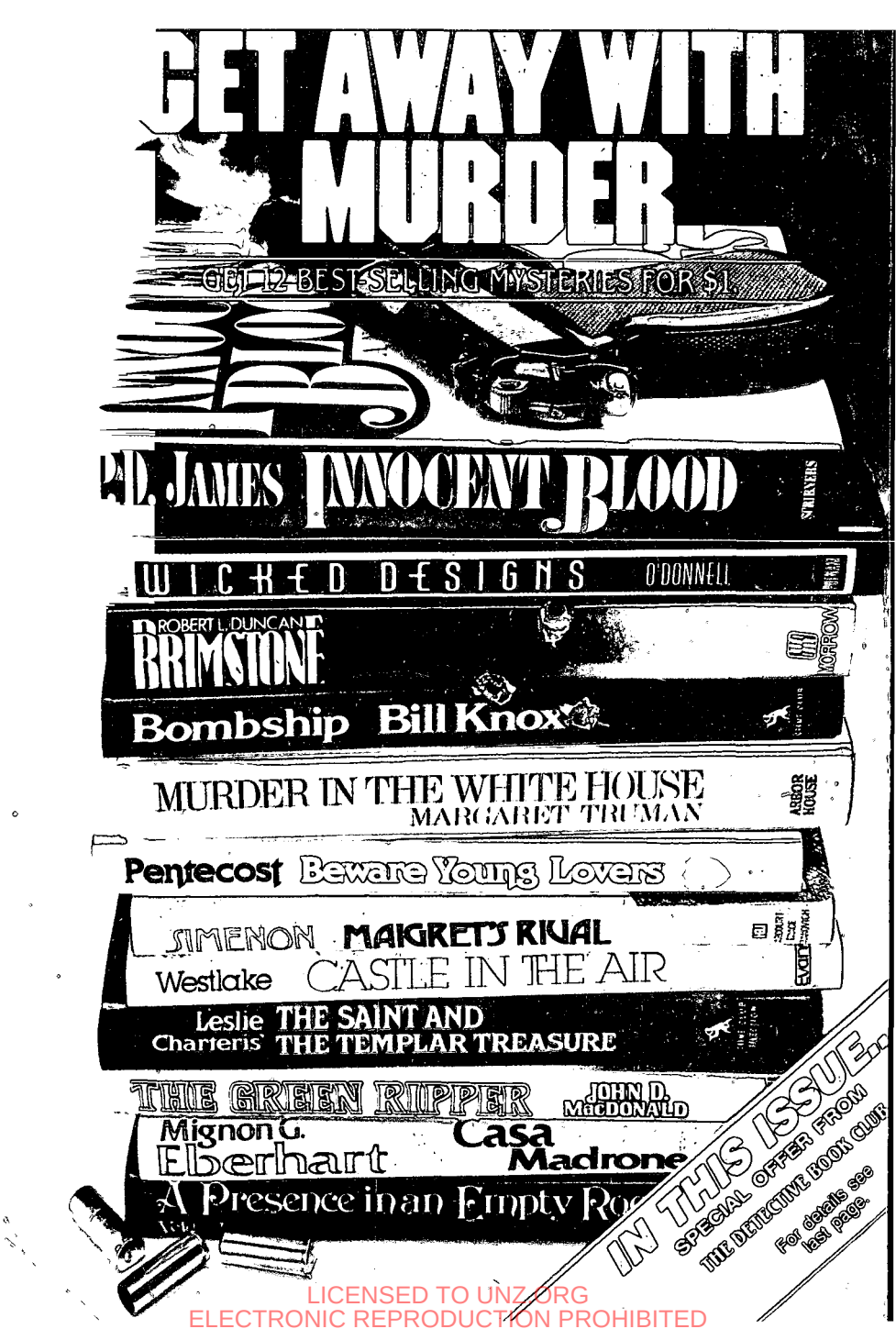
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